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**I'll Use This
DO-OVER
to Become the
IDEAL
LADY'S MAID!**

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I'll Use This Do-over to Become the Ideal Lady's Maid!

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YARINAOSERU MITAINANODE, KONDOKOSO AKOGARE NO JIJO WO
MEZASHIMASU! Vol.1

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Character Introduction

ANNETTE DU JULIAN
Emma's childhood friend.
A flirt who excels at getting others to spoil her.



RASHIDA MARIE ESLAN
Despite being the daughter of a duke, she aspires to be a lady's maid, just like Emma.



IAN HENRY STEPHENSON
For generations, his family has guarded and assisted time travelers. Protects Emma in both official and personal capacities.



BERNARD SAGDEN
A count's son who happens to be Emma's childhood friend and fiancé. Plotting to break his engagement with Emma.

EMMA GRACE SEAGROVE

The daughter of a viscount in the Monarchy of Reauxvil. Can go to the future using her time-travel power.

GLEN RAY BERING

A mysterious duke from the neighboring Olano Kingdom. He seems to know about Emma's "secret" ...?

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Prologue

IT was bright inside the room, even with the curtains closed. The light piercing through the small gap in the fabric practically blinded her. Despite reflexively pulling the blanket over her head, the sun's rays still warmed her. The gentle scent of flowers wafted in from her partially opened window. The aroma came from the white flowers blooming on the trees in the garden of her family home, the domain of her father, Viscount Seagrove.

Mmm, how nostalgic. What are those flowers called again? Emma Grace Seagrove thought to herself, three seconds from slumbering again.

"Emma! How long do you plan on sleeping?!"

Her mother's voice broke the silence.

"Ngh... A few more minutes..."

Despite an inexplicable sense of wrongness, Emma burrowed deeper into her cozy bed. The familiar softness made her feel safe. Which, in itself, made her wonder if she was still dreaming.

"Has it slipped your mind already?! You're moving into your dormitory at the Magic Academy today! The carriage will be here soon, young lady!"

Ah-ha. So I am still dreaming.

After all, Emma was already nineteen years old and quite independent, thank you very much. She entered the Magic Academy's dorms in the spring of her fifteenth year. Her time there had been the happiest of her life. Perhaps this dream was compensating for yesterday's nightmare. Though, unfortunately, yesterday was *reality*.

For a brief, *extremely* brief moment, she unwillingly recalled the previous night's events. Emma wanted to forget the cruelty of the real world by escaping into her dreams. But she wasn't even allowed that small reprieve. She sighed tiredly, still nestled under her blanket.

Hoping to at least do something about the overwhelming brilliance on the other side of her comforter, she reluctantly stretched her hand out from within her calming cocoon. Situated in the royal palace of the Monarchy of Reauxvil, Emma's room had been provisioned for her a year ago. The window was right next to her bed, which made it a breeze for her to open and close the curtains without ever leaving the plush haven. She considered this positioning a plus.

Her blanket covered her from head to toe as she groped blindly for the curtain. Before she realized that what should have been there wasn't, her hand was slapped. *Ouch!*

"Young lady, will you wake up already?!"

When the blanket was aggressively and brusquely torn from her body, Emma tumbled out of bed. *This is awfully realistic.* The impact with the cold, hard floor made her flinch.

"That...hurt," she groaned.

"Emma, such behavior is unacceptable for a young lady of fifteen. Especially in light of the fact that you'll be living on your own in the Magic Academy's dormitory starting today. Oh, goodness, I'm even more worried about you now!"

Rubbing her eyes, Emma stared up at her mother's face, looking a bit younger than she remembered. Her mother's latest diet had been a success, slimming her down considerably. Instead, Emma discovered herself looking upon a round, slightly plump visage. Regardless of her weight, her mother was considered a beauty by any standard, and that would never change. Even so, Emma secretly preferred this softer version of her mother because she found her more charming. While idle thoughts ran through Emma's mind, her mother spoke.

"Emma...? You're acting strange. I know there isn't a mission scheduled anytime soon, but...don't tell me you're in the middle of a time leap episode?"

"Impossible."

Emma responded automatically to her mother's outrageous question.

"Right. Right, of course not... Oh, yes, your fiancé, Lord Bernard, is also

moving into the dormitory today. You'll receive plenty of compliments on your appearance henceforth in your time at the Academy, but that's no excuse to neglect the way you carry yourself. You mustn't embarrass him or yourself. Have I made myself clear?"

Stuff and bother Lord Bernard. The beauty Emma inherited from her grandmother meant nothing in the face of that traitorous wretch's so-called true love for someone else. Because she knew that four years after the time in which this dream took place, her engagement would be called off.

"Yeeesss, Mother."

Though she cursed the man every which way in her heart, Emma responded promptly and dutifully. She had no desire to see his shameless face, even in her dream, so she took the fastest route to end this loathsome conversation. She dragged herself off the floor and sat on her bed. Satisfied that her daughter was done lazing about, Emma's mother left the room.

"Oh, the curtains."

She pointed her index finger toward the window and lightly twirled it. When she did, the small gap widened as the drapes opened fully. Seagrove Manor's garden lay resplendently outside the window. Emma reflected on how she had spent her life in her family's ancestral seat until she went to the Magic Academy at the age of fifteen.

She'd been right about the window being open, after all. Even within the confines of her dreams, the white blossoms' uniquely sweet scent made her eyes prick with tears as memories flooded in.

"I still can't believe how truly lifelike this dream feels," she murmured.

Despite knowing nothing would be there, Emma studied the back of her right hand and activated her magic.

"Sigil, activate."

After yesterday, the number on the sigil should have been zero. For her own peace of mind, she had chanted the spell the day before in front of the king to confirm that it would never activate again. Once she had, she knew her work was finished. Except—contrary to her expectations, the infinity symbol

appeared instead.

“How?!”

Emma inhaled sharply in shock. The previous night’s events rushed through her mind. Her former fiancé’s face looking so idiotic she almost forgot her rage. Her seemingly pure best friend, whom she’d trusted completely, sobbing hysterically. Her childhood friend, the prince, filled with both anger and distress.

And finally, the image of a young man emerging from the crowd of curious onlookers. He grabbed her hand, kissed it firmly...and made her heart jolt. Oddly enough, it was this very right hand to which he had pressed his lips.

Emma shook her head vigorously, trying to banish the memory. Unable to stop, she pinched her cheek hard. *Gah! Ow!*

Unable to accept the inexplicable wrongness she’d been sensing all this time, Emma stood up and gingerly made her way to her dresser to look in the mirror. She should have known her face like the back of her hand. Instead of last night’s elegant upswept coiffure, her hair fell in disarray around her shoulders. Her face itself, younger and rounder than she remembered, stared back.

What?! Wait, wait, wait. This isn’t a dream?

The haze in her mind steadily cleared, bringing much-needed clarity. Emma had unwittingly broken the taboo of her own prodigious talent and traveled back in time to the world she knew four years ago.

Emma's Life Before Going Back in Time

EMMA had a dream as a child. It sprouted one day when she was in the garden, cleaning up the toys her older brothers had left scattered after playing.

"Lady Emma? So this is where you were, hm? Your pancakes won't taste so scrumptious if they're cold."

"Sunny! Look at this mess. My brothers didn't even try to tidy up before they went back to their room. The fact that their tutor arrived is no excuse!" she huffed.

"Ah, and I presume that's why you're diligently cleaning up on your own, hm? How marvelous, my lady." Her eyes meeting Emma's, Sunny smiled at the little girl. She worked for Baron Seagrove as Emma's maid.

Emma stared up at the tree with its sweetly scented white blossoms. "These white flowers are sooo pretty! It won't be long before they all fall, and I'll be sooo sad then."

Sunny giggled softly before speaking. "I have an idea, my lady. Why don't we gather up the fallen petals when the time comes? I can place them in a pitcher of water and use water magic to create a lovely bouquet inside."

"Truly?! We should try it right now! Let's go back to my room and experiment, Sunny!"

"Of course. But first, why don't we wash our hands, change our clothes, and eat our snacks, hm?"

"Oookaaay!"

When Sunny gently touched her hair, Emma felt the need to rub her head against the woman's hand and purr like a cat. She thought Sunny was amazing because not only was she extremely kind, good at needlework, and skilled with hairdressing, but she was also a walking dictionary.

The moment Sunny took Emma's hand and started the trek back to the house,

Emma flinched, sensing a murderous aura nearby. Sunny detected the same intent earlier than the little girl. She wasn't a skilled, outstanding individual just for show. By the time Emma's mind clouded with fear, Sunny had already moved to protect her charge and confront the enemy. Which just so happened to be a fluffy monster called a magic fox.



Despite its close resemblance to a normal fox, it was well-known for possessing a disposition leagues more ferocious. The more troubling aspect was how it had managed to trespass into Seagrove Manor in the first place. Protective barriers around the surrounding town and the estate should have warded off monsters, so why was it even here?

Emma was terrified and clamped down on Sunny's white apron strings. Noticing her lady's fear, Sunny soothed her.

"Have no fear, Lady Emma."

Emma cowered behind Sunny, who adjusted her position to further block the monster's view of the little girl. Then she smiled gently down at her without a hint of panic or dismay. She patted Emma on the head.

Emma was deeply skeptical. She wanted to scream for help, but she couldn't make a sound—not when her throat dried up due to fright. From that point on, her recollection of the incident would become hazy and fragmented.

Yet she remembered how the magic fox lost its violent bloodlust after Sunny pointed her index finger at it and chanted a spell. Immediately, it turned on its heel and bounded over the garden wall, vanishing quickly. Only countless soap bubbles remained, floating in the garden. Emma, young though she was, understood that the monster had disappeared in pursuit of these bubbles.



THAT night, Emma questioned Sunny while sipping on a cup of hot milk.

"Sunny, you weren't afraid of the magic fox?"

"Correct. I would be unqualified to be your maid if I had been."

"Oh, really? Are maids so special? Then what *does* scare you?"

"The only thing that terrifies me is you being injured, my lady. Just the thought is enough to make me quake. Which is why, in comparison, mountains of needlework, cleaning, and even monsters mean nothing."

Though Sunny chuckled, Emma detected a fierce glint in her maid's usually soft eyes. Her heart raced at her first encounter with Sunny's unbending determination. She was only used to the woman's calm, cheerful temperament.

She remembered that well, too.

Maids are sooo incredible! I want to work as a lady's maid too!

On top of everything else, Sunny turned out to be extremely strong as well. That day cemented the maid as Emma's idol. Naturally, Emma dreamed of becoming a maid like Sunny. Whenever she prattled on about it, her parents and older brothers smiled indulgently while the object of her admiration looked on, embarrassed.

Several years later, the little girl would grow up and be confronted with the harsh reality that her dream would never come true.



IN a conference room located within the palace library, nineteen-year-old Emma was undertaking the final task of the job that had consumed her life thus far.

"It's quite hectic today, isn't it? Did something happen?" Emma asked.

"Representatives from the suzerainty, the Empire of Ulster, are visiting, and it seems a prince from the royal family is part of the delegation."

Formally dressed civil servants hurried through the courtyard in droves. Head tilted curiously, Emma watched the hustle and bustle through the window. Her childhood friend-cum-advisor, Ian, answered her questions.

"Hmmm. Is that right?" Acknowledging Ian's reply, Emma turned to the next page in the document she was reading. "I still need more reference materials. Specifically, records that will let me confirm the deployment of personnel after Plan B's implementation."

"Of course. I know where that is."

"Thank you."

At Emma's request, Ian pointed at the top shelf on one of the many towering bookcases nearby. They practically reached the ceiling. When he lightly snapped his fingers, the documents floated down to rest on the table where they sat.

Their country, the Monarchy of Reauxvil, existed in a world where magic was the norm. Everyone could use basic magic called life magic. Moreover,

depending on their disposition, each person shared an affinity with one, or more, of the four major elemental magics—earth, fire, water, and wind.

For example, Ian, sitting across from her, was most compatible with the attributes of water and wind. With jet-black hair and pale green eyes, he had always been tall for his age and emanated a calm, refreshing aura. When Emma learned of his elemental affinities, she thought they were perfect for his personality.

“...Is there something on my face?” Emma felt Ian’s gaze on her and raised her head from her analysis.

“It’s just been a while... No, um, I meant to say, ‘Wow, you’re as lovely as ever.’ That’s what I was thinking. Ahem.”

“Whatever are you on about, Ian?”

How suspicious that he cut himself off like that, which made her wonder what he would have said after “It’s been a while.” Still, his attempt to gloss over his initial words only exasperated her. As far as appearances were concerned, Emma possessed caramel-brown hair that fell down her back and striking azure eyes. Her distinct features and pale, almost translucent complexion were apparently reminiscent of her grandmother, who had famously been given the appellation “The Captivating Siren” in her youth. Emma couldn’t tell if it was heredity, but she knew there was no shortage of people who reacted to her in the same bewitched way.

Except, in all the years she’d known Ian, having grown up with him, she could count on one hand the number of times he’d complimented her looks. Which meant his words were a ploy. Suspecting he was hiding something from her, Emma frowned thoughtfully at him.

“You’re up to something, aren’t you?”

“Uhhh... In any case, never mind me, Emma. You need to remember all this. Or have you forgotten you’re short on time?”

She couldn’t deny his words, even if she was dissatisfied with Ian’s evasive behavior. After all, she *was* currently on a time traveling mission. Her magical affinity wasn’t with any of the four major elements. Instead, it lay with the one

for time.

All citizens in the Monarchy of Reauxvil, whether of common or noble birth, had the freedom to choose their profession. Except for those inclined toward time magic. They were given a special task to “See what the future holds.” Those with the ability to manipulate time were rare. The day *time* was confirmed as Emma’s magical attribute was the day her childhood dream of becoming an amazing maid like Sunny disappeared, as quietly as the morning dew dissipating under the sun’s heat.

For her current mission, her “location” was three months forward in time. Having left her physical body behind at that point in time three months ago, her consciousness had traveled alone to today’s temporal future destination. There, she rendezvoused with Ian, who had been awaiting her arrival as dictated by special records.

“Right... That should do it. Ian, I think you already know, but this mission will be my last one as a time traveler. Thank you for everything you’ve done for me so far,” she said. “After this, you’ll be just my best friend instead of my best friend *and* assistant. I can’t wait to have a normal friendship.”

“No thanks necessary. I’m happy I could help you. Emma, I...”

Ian stopped, struggling to find the right words. Until a moment ago, he’d been chatting with her in his usual relaxed manner. But a serious expression settled on his face. Their bond was deep and real, forged over the many years they’d known each other. So, despite realizing he wanted to discuss something of great import, Emma pretended otherwise and thrust out her right hand, palm facing down. Then she chanted.

“Sigil, activate.”

The digits “90” emerged, exactly the number of days from the point in time she’d leaped forward. There was only one rule for time travel: never know more of the future than absolutely necessary. More likely than not, she surmised that Ian was feeling maudlin over the impending loss of her time magic. In any case, she couldn’t afford any further peeks into the future.

“Return.”

Once she cast the spell, she closed her eyes, effectively shutting out the world around her. Behind her eyelids, red numbers counted down in a wickedly fast blur. 90, 89, 88...

“Emma! Listen to me, please...!”

Ian’s panicked voice shocked her when he was usually the epitome of calmness and kindness. But to maintain the system in place, conversing beyond this point with him was forbidden. He knew that, too. She wouldn’t be surprised if he apologized to her after she returned to her original time. That was the last thought in her mind before Emma lost consciousness. In the end, Ian never finished what he wanted to say.



“**WELCOME** back, Emma.”

“Good to be back!”

In the present, Emma slowly opened her eyes to find Ian sitting next to her. They were in a special room within the palace designated specifically for time travel use.

“And that’s the end of your time travel ability, hm? You’ve done well all these years. Be proud of yourself.”

“I could say the same to you, Ian. That concludes your duties as an escort-cum-attendant to time travelers for now. I don’t know what I would have done without you, so thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

As the son of Marquessate Stephenson, Ian’s family line was a special one, having served as aides to time travelers for generations. They acted as escorts for time travelers during their missions. Beyond that, they also resolved issues for them along the way, including any doubts or concerns the individual might have.

Emma thought about the Ian three months from now and couldn’t help worrying over his brooding tone at the end. The atmosphere had been so at odds with his normally tranquil aura. She felt a twinge of regret for not listening to him. This was unusual for her because she usually didn’t bother with questions of “What if.”

I wonder what he tried to tell me... In any case, there's no point in doing my head in about it now. I'll find out soon enough since I only have to wait three months.

Ian sighed in relief at Emma's smile as she thanked him, his expression relaxing. "With your duties to the country over, you're finally ready to marry into the Sagden family. I'm convinced that Bernard will make you a happy woman."

"I certainly hope so."

Those with an affinity for time rarely ever appeared... But when they did, more often than not, they were treated as oddities instead of tremendous talents because of the restrictions and limits of the ability itself. Once the individual fulfilled their predestined path, they would lose their time ability entirely. Once that happened, the only magic they could use was life magic. All this explained why nobility above a certain station desperately hoped their children wouldn't possess this affinity and also why individuals afflicted with the power were subjected to a great deal of sympathy by those around them.

"Though there is the issue of your...true nature. More precisely, the fact that he's unaware of it."

"How crass of you to point that out, Ian! You know I never intended for you to know the real me, either. But you can understand how impossible it became for me to keep up the act with you, considering how closely our lives have intertwined for almost a decade."

In contrast to her refined, ladylike appearance, Emma's true personality was animated and intense. For as long as she could remember, she carefully presented an elegant facade in line with her looks, so few people knew what she was really like. Emma's grandmother, who was kind and amiable for the most part, was bizarrely strict concerning conduct and etiquette. Under her tutelage, the exceedingly clever Emma quickly learned that her inherent disposition was far from what high society sought and admired in young ladies.

Naturally, when she and Ian first met, Emma initially continued her ladylike pretense. She was still young but already understood the ways of the world in which she'd been born. Except it hadn't taken her long to stop hiding herself

from him since they spent so much time in each other's company.

"I must admit, I still find it unnerving how suddenly you can go from complaining about a training manual to producing a winsome smile the minute a cabinet minister appears," Ian said.

"That's a given for a lady, Ian."

"You don't say? Then what about when you lure persistent men at parties to the shadows of the grounds only to threaten them with castration and such? Though I find their actions appalling, as a fellow man, I feel some sympathy for them. To follow you, expecting one thing and finding another entirely, must be shocking, eh?"

"Pish posh, don't tease me. Besides, we both know I can and *do* always count on you to clean up after me in those annoying situations, too. Have I told you again how much I appreciated your help?"

Watching Emma puff her cheeks in defiance, Ian laughed wryly before a gentle smile settled on his face. "Well, I personally prefer the 'real' Emma."

"You really are an oddball, Ian. I wager you're the only one who feels that way about me."

The monarchy was hosting a dress party tonight, solely in Emma's honor. For her many accomplishments over the last decade, she would be awarded a medal of merit for her service to the nation. The ceremony also signaled the end of her duties as a time traveler until the next person with the ability appeared. When that happened, she would teach them all she knew and pass on the baton, finally lowering the curtain on her part in the play.

Though I must admit, I'm incredibly excited, considering freedom awaits on the horizon starting tomorrow! It's been a nightmare having my life curtailed so that other states don't have the opportunity to steal the power to time travel.

Emma's footsteps were light as she headed toward her private chamber to prepare for the function.



BACK in her room, Emma changed into a pale pink dress gifted to her by her

fiancé, Bernard. She gravitated toward a mature, womanly style of clothing, so dresses in bold blues and reds filled her closet. As such, she felt out of her element in this particular ensemble geared toward sweet, young girls—a style she hardly ever wore.

As a child, Emma was keen to learn what she could do to become a lady's maid someday, just like Sunny. To this day, one of the things she enjoyed was coordinating outfits, from the dress to the jewelry to the hairstyle. Though the appearance of her time magic had consigned her childhood dream to naught, she still insisted on dressing herself, unlike other young noble women.

Today's unique circumstance was different. It called for donning the girlishly charming dress Bernard had sent—a dress she felt awkward in because it was at odds with her personality. *Goodness, I have no idea how to accessorize this dress since mine are so simple. What do other women do with something so pretty?*

A knock sounded on her door.

"Come in!"

"Emma! Congratulations!"

"Annette, it's you!"

While Emma dithered over her stylistic dilemma in front of her mirror, her childhood friend, Annette, walked in.

"Lord Bernard insisted on escorting me here, so we arrived together not long ago."

"Oh, really? Well, thank you for making the trip."

Emma smiled happily, glad to see her most trusted friend. Emma, Bernard, and Annette were all childhood friends. Whenever daughters of the ton turned out to possess the ability to time travel, many would remain unwed due to the rigors of their duty to the monarchy. To secure their cooperation, the government instituted a rule to affiancé each young lady to a young man from a suitable family. In Emma's case, her fiancé just so happened to be her childhood friend.

Incidentally, upon the awakening of Emma's affinity with time magic, the Seagrove barony was elevated to a viscountcy. And Bernard's later engagement to Emma resulted in Viscount Sagden's rank changing to Count.

What...in the world? Emma's eyes widened in surprise as they traveled down Annette's outfit. Her dress closely resembled Emma's, down to the color. Except hers was a vivid rose pink compared to Emma's light pink. While Emma's dress sported a modest amount of lace and pearls in the design, Annette's had those embellishments aplenty, plus a gorgeous array of ribbons. Almost as if Emma's dress was the base upon which Annette's was extravagantly enhanced. Annette noticed Emma's stare right away.

"Lord Bernard and I... No, I mean, um, our paths unexpectedly crossed at the dressmaker's! Yes, that's it. When I saw the dress he commissioned for you, I modeled my own after it. So...ta-da! We match, Emma!"

"We...we do indeed."

Emma quietly resigned herself to the situation after Annette's explanation and accompanying childish laugh. How could she have forgotten this was how Annette behaved? It had always been this way. If Annette liked something that belonged to Emma, she immediately copied her. In the same vein, many of Emma's friends mysteriously became Annette's, to the point that they excluded Emma from any weekend outings they went on.

The long and short of it was that Annette felt most comfortable with Emma when they shared everything. As for Emma, she learned early on in their friendship to let things go in the face of Annette's feather-brained but harmless behavior. So their relationship carried on like this, even to the present.

Although it seems like Annette designed my dress rather than just used it as a reference... No, no, I shouldn't doubt her. That would be wrong.

In a bid to erase the seed of suspicion sprouting in her heart, Emma turned back to the mirror and focused on arranging her hair. Yet, she couldn't suppress the thought that the dress she wore would suit Annette so much better.



"EMMA Grace Seagrove, come forth."

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

The main event for tonight’s function was Emma being awarded the Medal of Merit for successfully accomplishing her duties as a time traveler. Under the watchful gaze of a crowd of guests, Emma stepped forward and knelt before the king.

“You’ve done much and more for us since you were a little girl. For soldiering on despite all you’ve sacrificed in the service of our nation, you have my thanks.”

“I’m deeply grateful for your kind words, Your Majesty.”

Emma was literally a child when she began working for the monarchy. Since the beginning, the king himself made certain that her tasks didn’t overburden her, young as she was. Emma knew this would be the last time she’d be able to speak directly to the kind, noble man before her. She stifled a forlorn snuffle at the thought.

“...Right then. The medal,” he said.

Emma took his remark as a signal to rise. Once she did, he placed the medal over her head, the sash settling around her shoulders. Immediately, the guests in attendance cheered, their attention focused on the dais where Emma and the king stood.

With this, my job as a time traveler comes to an end.

She curtsied to the king, then pivoted and made her way down the platform, searching for Bernard. He should have been waiting to escort her, but for some strange reason, she didn’t spot him anywhere. As soon as she realized he had disappeared, Emma was surrounded by well-wishers.

By the by, it was inadvisable for young ladies of a certain age to be unattended at high society events like this one. Emma wasn’t a fan of such functions, though tonight’s had been unavoidable. Since Bernard was her designated escort for the night, she decided Ian didn’t need to attend. In hindsight, it was rotten luck considering the current situation.

Where in the world is Lord Bernard...? I don’t see Annette anywhere, either.

“Lady Emma, it’s been ages since I last saw you. Do you, perchance, remember me?”

Turning at the familiar voice, Emma discovered the older brother of one of her close friends at the Magic Academy. Her friend had invited Emma to her house countless times for tea, and without fail, her older brother would chaperone them. So, of course, she hadn’t forgotten him.

“How could I forget you, Lord Stanley? You’re looking well.”

“I’m glad to hear that! Extremely unfortunate there will be no dancing at tonight’s celebration. I would have enjoyed taking a turn with you, especially since you’re attending alone.” He abruptly clasped Emma’s hand and moved to brush his lips on it.

No, thank you, sir! She tugged it out of his grasp in the nick of time, stifling the overpowering urge to let that outraged remark escape. Then she plastered on a polite, artificial smile, glossing over the fraught moment.

“How fares Lady Cathy? I do so hope she’s in the best of health.”

“Ah... Yes, yes, she’s fine.”

Lord Stanley was taken aback by her exceedingly gracious rejection.

But a kiss on the back of the hand wasn’t a simple greeting in the Monarchy of Reauxvil. Not only did such a momentous act signify deep affection for the other person, but it also indicated submission and allegiance. In certain cases, it could even be used as a medium to cast magic. That was the extent of the gravity contained in the gesture. So for as long as one could remember, the children of this country were taught never to entrust their hands lightly to others.

Honestly, where is Bernard? At this rate, I’ll spend the rest of the evening alone, which is unacceptable. Because tonight’s soiree was for *her*. Yet her escort had vanished, leaving her to fend for herself. She was finding it increasingly difficult to make her way through the crush of people.

“I’ll be excusing myself now. Please give my regards to Lady Cathy!”

Adroitly extricating herself from the conversation with her friend’s older

brother, Emma hurried toward the edge of the hall. She found a deserted spot by one of the walls and tried to hide in plain sight.

Oh, that looks delicious... A table filled with hors d'oeuvres and fruits lined the wall where she fled. Evening functions were designed to facilitate conversations for guests to enjoy. Well-mannered ladies and gentlemen didn't deign to focus their attention on this space. Thanks to this unspoken social convention, Emma could enjoy the silence in her immediate vicinity...were it not for her stomach growling.

Come to think of it, I've barely eaten at all today. It's been so hectic since early this morning that I haven't even had a chance to breathe until now. She spotted her favorite fruit appetizers on the table. Peach, strawberry, cherry, blueberry, and mango. Wondering if she should select a few for herself, she glanced surreptitiously at her surroundings.

"Shall I arrange a plate for you?"

The amused voice came from behind her, from the opposite direction she glanced. Shoulders slumping in defeat, Emma turned around to see who spoke.

"No, I'm fine. Thank you for your..."

The word "consideration" went unvoiced as she saw who it was. Her eyes widened in shock. A mien so sophisticated it unintentionally made one gasp. Incredible height complemented a deceptively lean but strongly built frame that made a person wonder if he was a knight. Light purple irises glittered in his mysterious, almond-shaped eyes. His silky silver hair gleamed, fluttering over his brow as if trying to conceal his eyes. He possessed such a powerfully unique aura, even Emma, who normally cared not a whit about a man's well-groomed appearance, couldn't contain a small sound of surprise from escaping.

I...I know him.

"Ah... Perhaps you're familiar with me?"

He said it so casually that it was almost like he had read her mind. She forcibly trawled through her memories...and found one related to him and the excited shrieks of noble young ladies.

"I believe I am. We attended the Magic Academy together."

“Indeed, we did. I’m glad to hear I made an impression, hm?”

His tone suddenly softened, becoming friendlier.

“My name is Emma Grace Seagrove. And...if I recall correctly...you’re...Glen.”

“No, I’m Lester.”

Impossible. Emma tilted her head in confusion when she heard a name so different from the one she thought she knew. No, not *thought*. Definitely *did* know. *He’s Glen. His name is Glen.* There was no way she could have forgotten it, considering how her friends had gone on about him endlessly since they were crazy about him. He was the son of a duke from the neighboring Olano Kingdom, and he had attended the Magic Academy in their third year as an exchange student.

Once she fetched that first memory, more tumbled forth into her mind. Chief among them, his first day at the Academy. The young ladies from the aristocracy, always so elegant and demure in their daily lives, lost their collective minds that day. They created a veritable stampede in their rush to greet him. On the other hand, those same young ladies’ fiancés’ reactions were opposite but equally fervent. Emma recalled the young men’s extremely sour expressions as they set their eyes on Glen. His arrival had caused an astounding stir.

“I beg your pardon... Lord Lester, is it?”

“That’s correct.”

Emma scrutinized him more. He seemed accustomed to cheery, dazzling events like this one. Though unintentional, he naturally exuded confidence, indicating he knew his worth, which only enhanced his refined air.

Then why is he keeping to himself on the outskirts of the hall? Not to mention the penetrating stares of the young ladies still on him. It was clear to Emma that they wanted him to approach them and engage in conversation.

I need to make my escape as quickly as possible. I’d rather not get embroiled in unnecessary trouble. Yet she couldn’t stop obsessing over his name. It wasn’t even close to the one in her memory. Noticing Emma’s doubtful, clouded expression, he sidestepped the issue with his next remark.

“Might I direct your attention to a more urgent matter? I’m concerned about those two. They seem to be having some sort of heated argument.”

“What?”

Emma looked to where he pointed and saw a balcony. Beyond the curtains fluttering in the wind stood Bernard and Annette, who did appear to be arguing. They exchanged a few more words, then Bernard turned, intending to make his way back to the main hall. His entire attitude conveyed his agitation. Annette clung to his arm in a desperate attempt to stop him.

“They’re my fiancé and friend... Please excuse me, won’t you?”

Alarmed, Emma lightly curtsied to *Lester* before heading toward the balcony. Her heart hammered in her chest as she weighed the combined implications of the dress she wore today and Bernard and Annette’s behavior when they had picked her up earlier. She pushed her way through the concerned crowd of onlookers to the balcony.

No, I must be wrong. My anxiety is unfounded. With that thought circling her mind, she grabbed a handful of the fluttering curtain and pulled it aside.

“What are you two doing? Is something wrong?”

Bernard and Annette froze at Emma’s sudden arrival. For whatever reason, her fiancé stared at her with hostile eyes. Behind him, Annette looked to be on the verge of tears.

“Emma,” Bernard spoke, his voice resolute.

“What...is it?”

“I know I’m asking much of you...but won’t you call off our engagement?”

Before Emma could process his request, the crowd of guests around them stirred uneasily.

“What do you mean by that, Lord Bernard?”

Strangely enough, Emma’s voice didn’t waver an iota. But ice congealed in the depths of her heart, and her mind spun frantically. The three of them had been fast friends since they were young. Their relationship changed at the age of nine. Upon discovering Emma’s magical affinity with the element of time,

Bernard's father, then Viscount Sagden, proposed to the king that his son and Emma be engaged.

To this day, she still didn't know if the man's goal was an elevation of his rank from the start. Yet for the then-Baron Seagrove, a match with a viscount's son, particularly one already acquainted with his daughter, could not have been more felicitous. At the time, Bernard had warmly declared, "I'll gladly stay by Emma's side, helping her shoulder the terrible burden she has to carry!" Appreciative of his enthusiastic consent, Emma had decided to devote her life in support of him once her work as a time traveler ended.

"I...I want to protect her. I want to protect Annette."

But the Bernard who stood in front of her now, spouting drivel, seemed intoxicated with himself. He took no notice of Annette trembling behind him.

"Then you should have said so earlier," Emma said coolly. "Before Annette wrought herself into such an anxious state."

"Emma..."

Annette buried her face in her hands. Instead of consoling her, Bernard continued speaking.

"Except...you would have turned back time had I done so."

A hush descended on the hall with his reply. One could hear a pin drop; it had grown so deathly quiet. It was common knowledge that it was forbidden to use the power of time to travel to the past. Emma had only ever used her ability to travel into the future for her country's sake. Moreover, the government would never allow someone to travel in time willy-nilly because the ability would alter history. To accuse her of such a thing, and at a party to celebrate her accomplishments, no less, was tantamount to calling her a criminal.

"B-Besides...there's something else. Emma, look."

"Lord Bernard, please! Enough already!"

He ignored Annette's struggle and dragged her right hand forward, showing Emma the back of it. *Oh, dear!*

She saw a familiar sigil, even though no incantation had been uttered. She

could think of two reasons why it was visible. First, Annette hadn't undergone any formal training regarding time magic. And second, her friend was currently running high on emotions. Both combined meant she would have difficulty controlling the sigil, even if she knew how.

"This mark appeared on the back of her hand a short time ago, which I took as a sign to firm my resolve. You understand what this means, don't you, Emma...? In any case, you've been blessed with both beauty and brains, so you don't need me to be happy. But Annette...she's different from you, and I have to protect her. I *must*."

I can't believe Annette's the next time traveler... And all of a sudden, Emma understood. It was so simple, she was surprised it had taken her this long to suss out the truth. *Oh, I see. They've always loved each other.*

Her gaze turned toward Annette. Annette continued weeping because she couldn't stop this disaster from occurring. There was a space between her friend and Bernard, just enough to fit one person. Emma. That space had always belonged to her.

Was I the nuisance then...? The reality that her existence had been a hindrance to the two of them shocked Emma more than Annette being the next time traveler. She felt paralyzed and enraged. In the next instant, as she stared at Annette sobbing in Bernard's shadow, Emma's anger fizzled out.

Her newfound calm only provoked another question she couldn't answer. Why did Bernard have to call off their engagement so publicly? Everyone here had chosen to attend the party, expecting a celebration. When she thought about how uncomfortable they must all be feeling now, she wanted to disappear in shame.

Which brought her to this farce itself, taking place on an isolated balcony located within such splendid grounds. Well, it should have been isolated were it not for the raptly attentive gallery they had unfortunately attracted. Logically, Emma knew that if she meekly accepted the dissolution of her engagement and withdrew from this impromptu stage, the crowd would disperse, and things would return to some semblance of normal.

Is that what I really want to do, though? Emma shuddered, caught between

her welling fury and the need to maintain her ladylike pretense. Before she could say or do anything else, a familiar voice interjected from behind her.

“Lady Emma, what is this commotion?”

“Oh, Victor, I mean, Your Highness.”

It was Victor, the second son of the king. He strode imperiously through the throng of people to reach Emma. The same age as the trio, he had also been part of their cohort at the Magic Academy. But, due to his lofty station, he had only ever interacted with Emma, especially since her work had thrown her into constant contact with him by way of his father. Aware of his standing in comparison, Bernard abruptly stiffened, his expression uneasy. No longer did he play the tragic hero.

“Well... Just the small matter of dissolving an engagement.” Emma murmured quietly to Victor, trying to keep the situation from getting further out of hand. Though she also recognized that her restraint was meaningless at this point.

“A small matter of canceling an engagement?!” Victor’s eyes popped wide open. He kept his volume low in consideration of her, but regrettably, his stunned expression gave the game away. Even at a distance, those in attendance understood the gist of the situation.

“There have been quite a few misunderstandings. In short, he... Lord Bernard, son of Count Sagden, will not marry me.”

All Emma wanted to do was give free rein to her anger and spill every sordid detail. By sheer force of will, she curbed the nasty urge, instead providing the prince with an atrociously brief summary.

“Surely you jest, Emma? Except your expression makes it clear you’re telling the truth. The royal family won’t interfere if you both agree to call off the engagement. *But*. There is no denying that Count Sagden was elevated to his current rank solely on the basis of his son’s engagement with you. Naturally, I hope your father is prepared to relinquish the title with this news, Lord Bernard. Not to mention the ethics, or more accurately, the lack thereof, in your actions. As I recall, you recently entered government service as an apprentice, yes? I don’t foresee success in your career moving forward, good sir.”

For some reason, Victor declared this in a ringing tone that echoed throughout the venue. He projected loudly enough for his voice to carry all the way to the main hall, where the king was chatting with a few important individuals. They undoubtedly heard everything he said, just as he intended.

The prince's assertion rendered the three of them mute while simultaneously focusing the audience's attention on Bernard. He curled in on himself, his self-aggrandizing air fading so rapidly that it was almost surreal. Then, nervously, tentatively, he responded to Victor.

"As you can see, Your Highness, Lady Annette is the next time traveler. So, um...I presumed it wouldn't present a problem as such, if I, uh, wed her instead..."

And the light dawns. He just wants to marry someone who has an affinity for time magic. I doubt the lady herself even matters.

Now she understood why Bernard deliberately broke off their engagement here. With the royal family present, he thought he could maneuver another elevation in title for his house by marrying Annette, the next one to take on the mantle of time traveler. He had foregone seeking an audience with the king through official channels and instead staged this abhorrent act.

His blatant disrespect in so many ways was astounding. Greater than her own pain, indignation and dismay burned inside her at Bernard's lack of common sense and consideration. She suspected Annette and Bernard's earlier lovers' quarrel had been an attempt on her friend's part to stop his foolishness. Clearly, his deluded self-righteousness had won.

But the worst thing about all of this? The fact that Emma couldn't forgive herself for not realizing sooner what a conceited, empty-headed young man she'd been engaged to. Her anger, temporarily abated, bubbled up once more. She looked down in an effort to regain a measure of calmness. Except that what entered her field of vision was the light pink dress she wore.

I wouldn't be caught dead in a dress like this!

Emma heard something snap inside her mind.

"You imbecile."

“Emma...?”

The prince, who'd made his way through the gaggle of people to help his friend, cocked his head now, bewildered by her hurling such abusive language. Victor had only ever heard her speak in a ladylike manner, so his confusion was warranted. But Emma continued, unconcerned with his reaction.

“What were you thinking, Bernard? Wait, let me rephrase that question. *Were* you even thinking?!”

“E...Emma...”

Bernard's panicked expression showed he wasn't sure what was happening anymore. Seeing that foolish look on his face infuriated Emma even more, sending her rage through the roof. A distant rational part of her brain acknowledged it was too little, too late, to stop herself now.

“How vulgar and thoughtless must you be to think you can inform *His Majesty, the King*, of something like this so appallingly casually?! Have you any idea of the degree of your impudence?! On top of that, there was no reason whatsoever to conduct a personal affair like this so publicly. *At a function in the royal palace, no less!* Not only have you made a fool of yourself, you've made a fool of me, you reprehensible toad! And Annette! You! Are you truly satisfied with this nitwit?!”

Annette, open-mouthed at seeing Emma's anger for the first time, shook her head vigorously in denial. “I won't deny that I had a bit of a *tendre* for Lord Bernard...but...but you must understand that it was only the thrill of forbidden love for me... I never wanted things to escalate to this point!”

“Then you should have told him so because this idiot obviously thought otherwise! Annette, you *cannot* spend your life crying to get out of the messes you make by your own hand. It's one thing for you two to use me alone as some kind of bizarre catalyst to spice up your tragic love story. But when you don't set proper expectations and limits on a path you've put yourself on, you'll end up involving others without their consent. Case in point. The buffoonery we're being subject to right now!”

“You're right... Oh, Emma, forgive me for being so hopeless!” Annette pleaded.

“Of *course*, you’re crying again! This is exactly what I’m talking about! Annette, cease your infernal blubbering at once! Get a hold of yourself! If you keep this up, you’ll forever be led around the nose by a brainless gorm like him! Is that what you want?!”

When Annette began weeping again, Emma pulled out her handkerchief in exasperation, using it to roughly scrub away the other girl’s tears. It was always, *always* like this. Annette excelled at getting others to spoil her. In Emma’s opinion, the words “devilish” and “coquette” existed to describe her. Their entire lives, Annette had always been an unreliable crybaby whom Emma and Bernard supported.

This was why, despite her fury at Bernard, Emma only felt a sense of resignation toward Annette. There was a saying, “Banging your head against a wall is a poor way to paint it red,” and her friend personified it. No matter what advice Emma gave her, she never listened. Thanks to Annette, in her nineteen years of life, Emma had well learned there was only so much she could do for people like her before she put herself at a disadvantage.

Having already given up on Annette, the vast majority of Emma’s ire focused on Bernard. She found his behavior a hundred times more unforgivable because he intentionally created this situation. She glared venomously at him as he stood there, flustered by the situation developing differently from how he’d imagined.

“In any case! I gladly accept the ending of our engagement!” Emma declared. “It brings me the greatest joy to know I no longer have to marry an insufferable louse like you! Oh, and one more thing! *Do* give my regards to your father when you inform him he’ll have to relinquish his title!”

An imperious sniff finished off Emma’s tirade, wrath having possessed her. She felt cleansed, refreshed...for a moment. But the crowd quieted abruptly upon her last word when up until just a second ago they had been astir with sympathy for her.

Oh, no. I’ve well and truly done it now.

The uneasy atmosphere jolted Emma back to her senses. She recalled with excruciating clarity the past few minutes. She had just lambasted someone. At a

dinner party in the royal palace. In front of the royal family and nobility. A blunder so colossal on her part that she quite literally could not imagine anything worse than this.

“Pfft.”

Then the sound of someone snorting a laugh reverberated throughout the marble hall, followed by the *clack-clack* of footsteps breaking the silence as they drew closer. A few seconds later, *he* appeared. The young man Emma had been talking to earlier at the buffet table.

“Lester...”

When Victor tried to talk to him, the owner of the laughing voice raised a hand, silently asking their mutual friend to stand down. The young man’s refined, confident carriage and aura made him appear even more princely than the actual prince. Only a handful of people in the Monarchy of Reauxvil could behave in such a relaxed manner with the royal family.

So who exactly is he...?

“Isn’t that...Lord Glen?”

“You’re right, it is! I thought he returned to his own country, though? Ahhh... He truly is a sight for sore eyes...”

Those voices must’ve belonged to classmates from the Magic Academy, as their owners fawned over him. Emma had been on the mark about his name. He was Glen, not Lester. While that thought drifted in her head, the man in question took her right hand in his, the action coming easily and naturally to him.

Instantly, several young ladies shrieked, their shrill cries echoing in Emma’s ears. It reminded her of a similar commotion the day he transferred to the Academy. Emma, her mind perplexed by her blunder and this young man who insisted on calling himself Lester, watched things unfold dispassionately, like this was happening to some stranger.

She wished he had at least greeted her first or kneeled. Anything to give her a chance to avoid what was transpiring. Alas, she would not be granted a reprieve. He didn’t waste any time as he brought her hand to his lips, brushing

them lightly against her skin.



“Eeep!”

The moment Emma registered the soft sensation on the back of her right hand, the background noise increased. But the din sounded far away to her. Even the panicked Bernard and sobbing Annette barely registered in her peripheral vision. Curiously enough, Victor made no attempt to stop the kiss, despite his puzzled face clearly stating he couldn't discern if the kiss was one of affection or allegiance.

And finally, there was the self-professed Lester himself, who stood before her, yet to say a word. Fierce determination illuminated his eyes, seizing her heart in a vice grip. Within the smoldering depths of his gaze, Emma detected tenderness and kindness. She had never been so intensely scrutinized by a man.

“Um...”

For the briefest moment, she considered apologizing for her behavior and reclaiming some measure of dignity by donning her ladylike facade again. In reality, she rejected the thought. It would be futile now to keep up appearances, no matter what she did.

“How...how dare you do such a thing without warning to a woman... No, a person! Have you no manners, you boorish oaf?!”

Emma angrily shook off his hand, her sanity returning to her. Not bothering to conceal her flaming-red cheeks, she raced out of the hall. *Bang!* The door to her private room in the palace slammed shut behind her as she took refuge inside. She dove onto her bed and screamed bloody murder.

“You’re a disgrace, Emma Grace Seagrove!”

Cursing someone to high heaven was unladylike behavior, yet she had done just that, and in front of a great many people to boot.

“But I couldn’t help myself! It was impossible to maintain control in such a... well...*impossible* situation!”

She sat up on the bed and tried to convince herself that she’d been justified.

“And then there was...that odious man.”

When her eyes skated over the back of her right hand, she unwittingly

recalled the sensation of his lips. The act wasn't what troubled her. She had received a kiss on the hand many times from those she trusted. No, it was the fact that he'd so forcibly commandeered her hand. Her face warmed again, remembering the incident. Emma angrily shook her head to dispel the thought. *Just because we're acquainted doesn't...doesn't mean he can do something like that without a word!*

Determined to consign him to a dark, forgotten corner of her mind, she focused on the most important thing—starting tomorrow, she would be a free woman. She didn't give a fig about Bernard forcing her into such an untenable position, nor did she care whether the Sagden family fell into ruin. The only thought on her mind was leaving this palace chamber and going home to Seagrove Manor. She focused on this silver lining.

At least she intended to...if not for the unbidden recollection that Annette was the next time traveler. Which meant she would be responsible for teaching and transferring the responsibilities accordingly. Emma slumped and buried her face into the bedding.

Many manuals and rules governed time travel. Because only the individual's mind traveled into the future, they needed to memorize all the necessary information taken from their temporal destination. A child would have been easy enough to train since they would be malleable.

But Annette was already nineteen. Incompatible with the four elemental magics, her friend had specialized in life magic during their three years at the Magic Academy, from which they had graduated a year ago. In hindsight, she couldn't attune to the other elements because her affinity for time had lain dormant until now.

Taking into account Annette's personality, Emma wondered if she would even be able to fulfill her role as a time traveler. She ruminated in silence. Training Annette would be tremendously difficult; she could predict that much. Her expression darkened with foreboding as she mulled over her impending plight. Raising her torso from the bed, she turned toward the bathroom and snapped her fingers.

Fsssh. The sound of hot water rushing into her tub filled the room. Then and

there, she decided to bathe and sleep. Tomorrow's problems could be dealt with tomorrow.

She admitted to being grateful for one thing and one thing only. The incontrovertible fact that she would no longer be marrying into the Sagden family. Ergo, and with all due respect to her grandmother, who had taught her so much, there was no need for her excessively ladylike act anymore. Emma considered herself well and truly done with the role of a good, docile little girl.

Technically, I stopped being a little girl a long time ago, what with the years I spent serving the country as a time traveler while simultaneously fulfilling my duty as Bernard's betrothed. Heh. She let out a dry, self-deprecating laugh at the thought. Strangely enough, she was unbothered by it. From now on, she would live her life the way she wanted to, and nobody could stop her.

"Even so...there isn't much I'm actually capable of!"

Submerged in the tub, Emma faced the reality of dissolving her engagement. Her face paled as she considered her circumstances.

Fact one: She had spent three years as a student at the Magic Academy.

Fact two: She had naturally mastered using life magic through the everyday process of, well, living.

Fact three: She had only studied elemental magics in the Academy because it was the only place where one *could* learn how to use it. Lamentably for her, aside from the element of time, water was the only other attribute she was compatible with. Even then, just barely. It frustrated her that she still had such a difficult time utilizing it.

On a fundamental level, most people only had an affinity for one element. In that sense, Emma proved exceptional by demonstrating her aptitude with two. However, it seemed difficult to make a living by undertaking work using elemental magic.

Glub, glub, glub. The water frothed as she sank deeper into the tub. She felt like she'd been dragged out of a fairytale and into the real world. *Glub, glub, glub, glub.* Emma slipped further into the water until it covered her chin. Then she exhaled heavily. *Glub, glub, glub, glub, glub.*

Surrounded by hot water, she lost herself in a trance as she stared unseeingly through the misty, distorted atmosphere. A childhood memory surfaced in her mind. Countless soap bubbles floating in the garden at Seagrove Manor. White flowers blooming everywhere. An image of Sunny's face: a warm, gentle smile curling on her lips.

I can't believe it's been seven years since Sunny went back to her hometown to marry...

The silence lengthened. And then.

"A maid!"

Before Sunny's round face disappeared from the forefront of her mind, Emma jerked upright, water splashing.

"That's right... I can still become a lady's maid! It's not too late!"

She was free now that the specter of marriage to Bernard no longer marred her life. In the Monarchy of Reauxvil, nineteen was the age by which citizens graduated from the Magic Academy and took their first step toward independence. A fair number of aristocratic young ladies chose to wed immediately, but nineteen was still young enough to be employed as a lady's maid. The itch to start right away elicited a ticklish excitement within her. The feeling fizzled almost as soon as it erupted when she took a second to think rationally.

"Perhaps it's too late to become an incredible, powerful maid like Sunny... If only I could enroll at the Academy again."

To be employed as a lady's maid by the royal family or nobility in this country, a woman needed to fulfill certain conditions. In addition to normal skills like literacy and needlework, she also needed to be able to use elemental magic. Although soldiers were hired separately, at the minimum, a lady's maid had to be capable of protecting her charges.

As people aged, it became more and more difficult to hone their elemental magic. During her time at the Magic Academy, Emma had been so busy with her job as a time traveler that she often missed lessons several times a week. On top of that, her government-mandated engagement put a strain on her time. In

light of all this, at this juncture, it would be virtually impossible for her to obtain power equal to that of the maid she idolized as a child.

I'm glad my power's gone... With everything that had happened, Emma felt faint of heart today. If the opportunity to time travel presented itself again, she was weak-willed enough to surrender to temptation and violate the forbidden rule. Putting an end to her despondent musings, she finished in the bathroom, burrowed into her bed, and settled between the sheets and blanket.

Darn it, I missed my chance to eat dinner. Considering how abysmally I failed at playing the lady, I should have enjoyed the food at the party. Her vision of those scrumptious hors d'oeuvres was followed by one of Sunny's face. A dazzling memory, steeped in hope and brilliance. She wanted to touch those magic bubbles. It was her last conscious thought before she fell asleep.



THAT night, Emma had a strange dream. She couldn't pinpoint the exact timeframe, but she estimated it took place a little over a year ago, during her third and final year at the Magic Academy. She was walking with the self-professed Lester... No, Glen, in town. He carried a great many things and refused to let Emma ease his burden, though she offered. She wondered why Ian and Glen's valet weren't present in this dream.

After strolling together for some time, the two of them boarded a carriage. Inside, Glen beamed happily at her. He looked different than he did at the dinner party. His eyes had been sharp and brooding when he'd kissed her hand.

I've never even had a proper conversation with Lord Glen. It makes no sense that I'm even having this dream. Even though Emma knew this was a dream, she couldn't resist investigating the contradiction. It was almost as if what happened in real life influenced the dream, her mind conjuring a version of him she didn't know. When Glen's smile vanished in her dream, the world immediately went dark.

A familiar sight expanded before her. In the deep, inky darkness, countless red numbers twinkled. Usually, she aimed for the number she wished, and it would diminish, disappearing from view. But this dream was different. So many numbers floated everywhere, flickering, tumbling, and weaving all over. *I think*

I'm getting dizzy. The moment she had that thought, the dream ended as abruptly as a string being snipped.

Returning to the Magic Academy

EMMA inherited her dresser from her grandmother. Its ostentatious design stood apart from the simple furnishings and decor of Seagrove Manor. Reflected within the graceful, streamlined mirror was not the face she always saw.

Her straight hair fell just past her shoulders. She cut it the day before she moved into the Magic Academy's dormitory—yesterday if she really had traveled back to the day she embarked on her academic journey. At home, her maid helped her dress and get ready, but she would be on her own at school. Ergo, she'd decided to keep her hair short, prioritizing practicality over fashion. Emma was confused but had enough sense to acknowledge that she had been a pragmatic fifteen-year-old.

"What in the world is going on...?"

She struggled to wrap her head around this unexpected circumstance. She had been living her life as duty demanded up until yesterday... No, not yesterday. Four years from today, if she was to believe that she had gone back to the spring of her fifteenth year, the morning she would move into the Academy's housing.

Knock, knock.

"My lady? Do you require my assistance, after all?"

Worried that the viscount's daughter was still abed, her maid opened the door and peeked into the room. Reflexively, Emma turned her head to check the time on the wall clock. It wouldn't be long until the carriage arrived to pick her up.

"I'm fine. I'll prepare myself in a flash!"

Despite not having a handle on the situation, she *did* understand the need to rush. Setting aside the myriad questions in her mind, Emma opened her closet.



“EMMA... The time has finally arrived, hm? Oh, dear, I’ll be so lonely without you, darling. Whatever will I do?”

Eyes moist, her mother stood outside in the driveway to see her off. In the Monarchy of Reauxvil, entering the Magic Academy meant standing on the cusp of independence. After attending the school for three years and living on its grounds, many graduates immediately took their first real steps into adulthood, whether they moved into the lodgings provided by their desired employers or married.

Which explained her mother’s sentimental reaction. It stemmed from her thinking that her daughter would follow this path like everyone else. Emma had been under the same impression until yesterday, so she couldn’t blame her. She resisted the masochistic urge to blurt out that, in four years, she would be moving back into Seagrove Manor after the debacle of her failed engagement. Instead, she replied calmly.

“Mother, it pains me, too, to be separated from you. Look after yourself, won’t you? I need you to be hale and hearty when I come back during long recesses.”

“Of course, sweetheart. Make sure you eat and rest properly, hm?”

Her mother wrapped Emma in a tight, warm hug. A great deal of her confusion magically disappeared thanks to her mother’s affection. She was fifteen again, back home. At this age, she could be forgiven for wanting to be spoiled by her loving mother during a tough time. Emma was within her rights to moan and groan about a disaster.

That’s right. The first time I experienced this day, I left home weeping like a banshee. Oh, how nostalgic.

When her mother reluctantly released her, Emma boarded the coach. From Seagrove Manor, it would take a little over an hour to reach the Magic Academy, where students from all over the country keen on studying magic would gather. But the Seagrove seat of residence was in the monarchy’s capital, so it was surprisingly close to the school.

Staring out the carriage's window, Emma smiled back at her mother, who waved so frantically that she feared the woman's hand would fall off. Once she returned her mother's farewell gesture with one of her own, she spoke to the driver.

"The assembly's start time has been postponed. Would you mind terribly if we took our time with the journey?"

"Understood, my lady. I'll make sure this is a leisurely drive then."

"Much obliged."

Emma had a good reason for her sudden request. She wanted to test the prevailing theory of time magic that stated, "Even if one travels back in time, history has the power to correct itself, so it is impossible to change what has already occurred." For the rare individuals who possessed an affinity for time magic, they had one primary role—to travel however many months into the future to verify which existing policy measures should be executed. They were forbidden from traveling into the past.

I remember learning about how, a long time ago, the government would send time travelers on missions decades into the future. Honestly, it sounds terrifying and overwhelming. I'm glad the king doesn't consider dramatic time leaps like that worthwhile.

Incidentally, the Magic Academy had eight dormitories, separated by gender. The first time Emma attended, she'd been assigned to dormitory number five. Coincidentally, her room had been right next to Annette's, and she had spent those three years in school looking after her flighty, unreliable friend.

If my memory serves me correctly, dorm rooms are assigned on a first-come, first-serve basis. In my first go at life, I arrived at the Academy with plenty of time to spare. Let's see what happens when I change the timing a bit.

In four years, she would lose both her fiancé and closest friend anyway, so she might as well enjoy this opportunity to her heart's content. Which included the desire to fulfill her childhood dream of becoming "A lady's maid as strong, kind, and amazing as Sunny." That was why Emma needed to know whether or not it truly was impossible to meddle with the past.



“LADY Emma Grace Seagrove, yes? Cutting it extremely close, aren’t we?”

She stood in the special reception area for dormitory students set up at the Magic Academy’s front entrance. An older girl manning the desk, most likely her upperclassman, spoke bluntly to Emma. She had planned on only changing her original arrival time by a small amount but reached the school just before check-in ended for on-campus students. Flustered, she bowed her head in embarrassment.

“I-I apologize for my tardiness.”

“Right then. You’re assigned to dormitory building number eight.” She gave off the air of a by-the-book honor student. Summarily ignoring Emma’s apology, she instructed Emma in a peevish tone, indicating her annoyance over the girl’s lateness.

“Th-Thank you...”

“Once you enter your room, please change into the provided school uniform. Additionally, bedding and such will be distributed before nightfall, so make sure you’re in your room then. As far as dinner... Excuse me, are you listening?”

Emma didn’t register a single one of the rapid-fire instructions being hurled her way. *Dormitory eight. Different from the first time.* Instead of answering the older girl’s question, she asked one of her own.

“Um, begging your pardon... But could you tell me which dormitory Annette Du Julian is in?”

“Fine,” she huffed, running her eyes down the list. A moment later, one of the lines on the white piece of paper glowed brightly.

“Annette Du Julian is in dormitory number five.”

“Thank you very much.”

Not only was she *not* in the room next to Annette’s, she had also been assigned a room in a different building. She didn’t have much evidence, but so far, the commonly accepted theory regarding travel into the past was proving to be wrong. The past *could* be changed. Which made her certain that

everything she would learn from now on at the Magic Academy would most certainly come in handy.

Registration complete, Emma picked up her bags and prepared to walk toward her dormitory. Two male students trotted over to her from the broad tree-lined path that led to all the lodgings.

“Won’t you tell me your name?”

“Here, allow me to assist you with your luggage.”

Oh, it’s them. Normally, she would have greeted them politely. Except Emma knew they both had fiancées. Not only that, they also had a reputation for hitting on new female students every year.

“No, thank you,” she responded. “Might I ask why you gentlemen are here in the first place? Considering boys are not allowed to enter the girls’ dormitories.”

“Ah... Um, right you are, miss.”

They recoiled at Emma’s emotionless smile—which could be more aptly described as a baring of teeth. Surprise replaced the surly expression on the older girl’s face when she witnessed this interaction. A beat later, impressed by Emma’s no-nonsense attitude, she offered her one piece of advice.

“Dormitory eight is right by the first side path from the main avenue. Take that turn, and you’ll see the building.”

“Thank you again!”

Beaming at her upperclasswoman, Emma curtsied before strolling to her new home.



THE next day, Emma woke up refreshed and energetic after a wonderful night’s sleep. She stretched broadly, moaning unconsciously at how good the movement felt. Frankly speaking, she wasn’t the best at waking up. It always took her a long time to connect with the real world again. But today was different. Excitement bubbled inside her at the thought of lessons starting soon.

Emma had one goal for her second life. She would only commit a moderate

amount of time and effort to her duties as a time traveler. She had no desire to devote her entire being to the work again. Her new strategy would free up time in her days, which she would use to master magic properly. This plan was designed to accomplish her dream of becoming a lady's maid like the one she admired so much.

Remarkably enough, her time travel missions encompassed a variety of tasks, big and small. For example, confirm the weather at a specific point in the future or determine if the wheat harvest was bountiful. Accordingly, she surmised that her knowledge from her first life could be used in this one to make more time for her.

"Oh, and I need to end my engagement with Bernard as soon as I possibly can."

Incidentally, the Magic Academy in the Monarchy of Reauxvil didn't hold an entrance ceremony for new students. Right out of the gate, its pupils were subjected to a class placement test. This set the tone for an academic schedule so brutal over the next three years that it created a challenge to foster social relationships and one's own emotional development.

How nostalgic! Classes are formed based on the student's grades. They also determine the ease of selecting electives, so I have to make sure I do well on today's exam.

In her first life, Emma successfully made it into the top class because she prepared thoroughly for the test. But in reality, she was nineteen on the inside. When she reviewed the test materials last night, she was surprised to discover how much information she retained. Even so, many aristocratic young ladies and gentlemen had studied like mad, aiming for the top class as well, so she couldn't afford to let down her guard.

I think... I should be fine, though. She nibbled on a piece of bread while cramming the important points one last time. Then she washed down the remainder of the slice with her cup of milk tea before standing up and spinning herself around in front of the mirror. The skirt of her white dress uniform flared as she twirled. Once she stopped, it settled again around her legs, the hem just long enough to cover her knees. All the girls wore the same thing because this

school didn't discriminate between students of common and high birth. Remembering how she looked at graduation, she felt rejuvenated by this attire.

This isn't bad at all!

"Off I go!"

Making her announcement to her empty room, she left the dormitory, her steps light.



"**EMMA...** Explain yourself. There's a rumor that you treated two second-year students, the Stanley and Allison boys, cruelly yesterday."

"Hello to you, too, Ian."

A few minutes earlier, upon entering the classroom where she would take her placement test, Emma found over half of the seats already occupied. Among the students, she spotted a young man whose refreshingly good looks made him conspicuous. Ian. He waved her over when he noticed her, so she strode over to take the empty seat next to his. Those were the first words out of his mouth the moment she sat down. He couldn't conceal his surprise at the turn of events.

"The second- and third-year students are quite pleased by your behavior, too. It seems they enjoyed hearing about an attractive new student who cut down those two libertines with nothing more than her sharp wit," Ian continued. "But did they actually do something awful to you to earn your ire? I'm sorry if they did, especially because I wasn't there yesterday to escort you."

What Emma wanted to know was how Ian automatically assumed the "attractive new student" in the rumor meant her. He spoiled her too much, being more considerate of her than her two older brothers and Bernard. Which was saying something since those three indulged her as well.

"It wasn't that dramatic, Ian, so calm yourself. I just...thought it might be time to behave like my real self."

"Truly, Emma? Are you sure you want to do this?"

Ian was deeply, genuinely worried. *Even though he's the one who said he*

preferred the real me. She pouted, ready to give him a piece of her mind before she paused and reconsidered. The Ian who had said that was four years in the future, so she decided to be generous and forgive him.

This led her to recall her last sight of him on her last day as a time traveler. Ian, in the future, developed into a young man with a rugged, muscular build. But the one next to her now, eyes wide in consternation, was still a boy. Though his height remained the same, this Ian was thin and lanky, almost adorable. The other girls agreed with her assessment because, the whole time, she sensed the endless covert glances they directed his way.

Oh, I forgot he amasses quite a few admirers among the female student body. Even Annette used to tell me how much she fancied him. That's right, she had feelings for Ian, not Bernard, back then.

Staring at the girls sitting behind him, Emma gave them a slight nod in greeting. They snubbed her and turned their attention away. *Blast... It seems I'm destined to repeat the rough beginning I had here...*

At this point, the other students weren't aware of Emma's affinity with the element of time. They would find out during their first lesson after the classes had been decided by the placement tests. Until then, they would frown disapprovingly at the imbalanced, peculiar duo she and Ian made. The handsome heir of a marquess and the daughter of low-ranked nobility whose only saving grace was her beauty, one who *already* had a different young man as her fiancé. Emma would weather such cold treatment from those around her until the end of their first extended recess, consigned to being a social outcast for the duration.

Ahhh... Not this again... While she debated the idea of jumping forward a few months to a less socially fraught time, she absently sensed someone's approach on her other side.

"May I sit here?"

"Yes, of course."

Emma responded politely, automatically dredging up a ladylike smile... Then she froze, her face stiffening in shock.

“Thank you.”

From behind a fringe of sparkling silver hair, she just glimpsed pale purple eyes.

“Glen, that’s where you’re sitting? Then we’ll take the row behind you.”

“Fine with me.”

He turned toward his attendants and replied matter-of-factly.

Why...is he here? Emma had met him the day before yesterday, no, four years from now, at the function in the royal palace. He looked younger in the present, but she had no doubt it was the same rude boor. The first time they ran into each other was at the buffet table. Their second meeting that night—not wanting to recall it, she forcibly blanked her mind.

In any case, his enrollment at the Academy was supposed to take place two years from now. She should know. On the first day of her third year, the school halls echoed with her friends and other girls’ ecstatic shrieks.

Why?! Why is he here?! Is it my fault... But how?! The only thing I changed was the time I arrived at the dormitory yesterday! Was that enough to change the course of events so drastically...?

Emma didn’t want anyone, especially Ian, to take note of her inner turmoil, but her facial muscles refused to cooperate as she tried desperately to craft a ladylike smile. *I wish Grandmother had taught me what to do in situations like this. No, no, it isn’t her fault.* She mentally shook her head, attempting to shake off her unrest.

“My name is Glen Ray Bering.”

He introduced himself, most likely prompted by curiosity as to why she stared so fixedly at him, unmoving. Not a word escaped her lips. She knew she had to reply because custom dictated so when one was addressed by a higher-ranking noble. But...her voice was stuck in her throat. Even knowing how impolite it was to keep staring at him, Emma could neither look away nor speak. She felt helpless and betrayed by herself.

“Emma? Is he an acquaintance of yours?”

“Huh?! Oh...um... I don’t...believe so...”

Ian’s concerned question broke her self-inflicted trance. Yet she was unsure how to answer him, so the best she could manage was that halting response. She wasn’t technically lying because they didn’t know each other *now*, but Emma herself *did* know him. Then there was the fact that he shouldn’t even be here yet.

In the next instant, the air around her shifted as “Glen” huffed in amusement.

“Perhaps you’re actually quite meek, hm?”

“Ngh!”

He heard! He knows about how I treated those upperclassmen! Though “Glen” spoke leisurely, his gaze was knowing as he looked down at her. Emma blinked, experiencing an uneasy sense of guilt, quickly followed by the memory of her atrocious behavior at the dinner party. He had definitely been part of the audience subjected to her figure insulting Bernard to the ends of the world.

Her overwhelming sense of shame threatened to swallow her whole. The only consolation she had was that he didn’t know about it in the present because it wouldn’t happen for another four years. Actually, she would make sure it *didn’t* occur at all this time.

Blast, blast, blast... Emma’s face heated up. She had to stop her train of thought *now* before she unwittingly made a greater fool of herself. With that, she dropped her eyes to the textbook in front of her, still not having uttered a single sound to him. And she made sure her right hand stayed out of his sight.

“I’m Ian Henry Stephenson, her escort.”

“Ah, Marquess Stephenson’s son, then? Nice to meet you. I’m Glen Ray Bering.”

“Bering... You bear the same name as a dukedom in the Olano Kingdom.”

“I’m an exchange student. I’d appreciate whatever you can teach me about Reauxvil.”

“Of course. It would be my pleasure.”

While Emma remained frozen, Ian and Glen conversed congenially, smiling at

each other. They politely paid her no heed. Realizing they had noticed she was upset but chose not to comment only added to her embarrassment. Even though she was the only one who knew about what happened four years in the future. *You're ridiculous, Emma Grace Seagrove.*



ONCE the class placement test ended, it was time for lunch in the school cafeteria.

“Emma, how do you think you did?”

“Hm... Well enough...probably.”

There was no need for Emma to ask Ian how he fared because his brilliant mind always earned him top marks.

“Frankly, Emma, I’m surprised to see you this tired. You’re so adept at studying.”

“Oh, that’s because...”

She shut herself up when she realized she was about to finish her sentence with, “It’s been some time since I last hit the books.” The piercing stares of other girls in the background as they focused on Ian like he was prey also gave her pause. They were judging the best chance they had to talk to him.

They were free to use their afternoons as they pleased after testing ended. Which was why Emma and Ian were enjoying a leisurely lunch. Ian, who always seemed to be on duty, held a sandwich in one hand. On her plate rested a mountain of various fruits.

Until the day before yesterday, she loathed gorging on her favorite foods, deeming it socially unacceptable. But now that she planned on rejecting the path leading to her being the wife of a future count, she no longer needed to concern herself with a moderate diet. So she would allow herself a measure of impropriety, starting with this plate of fruits.

“May I sit next to you?”

Hearing those words from behind her made her hackles rise. Intense loathing bubbled to the surface. The subtly smarmy voice belonged to none other than

Bernard.

“Lord Bernard, you’re looking well since we last saw each other,” she said.

Despite her decision to be true to herself, her pride wouldn’t allow Emma to reveal her real nature to Bernard. He was the only one who didn’t deserve to know her genuine personality. So she deliberately stood up and curtsied courteously at him.

She remembered that she’d done the same thing in her previous life. In seconds, he would loudly declare her to be his fiancée. Which would result in her being labeled a “Vulgar harlot who dallies with other lords despite having a fiancé of her own.”

When everyone would eventually find out about her time affinity, they would also learn of Ian’s appointment by the country as her official escort in relation to her ability. This stigma would disappear at that time, but she still wanted to avoid the unpleasantness of being branded a tramp. The best way to do that would be to prevent Bernard from making his announcement. Setting her plan in motion, she gently encouraged him to sit before playing her move.

“Lord Bernard, have you, by any chance, met with Annette yet?”

“N-N-N-N-No, not yet.”

This suspicious reaction...was undoubtedly a sign of his guilt. But there was no reason for it. Childhood friends could meet without issue by dint of their relationship. His panicked reaction to the unexpected question conveyed he already had a reason to feel guilty.

So they were having an affair this early, hm... Ugh, how deplorable. I feel even more pathetic now. She wouldn’t prolong this fruitless engagement in her second life. The sooner she proposed its end, the better. For her and for the two of them.

Perhaps now was as good a time as any. Emma almost gave into temptation before reason prevailed. She would first need to discuss the matter with His Majesty, either with her father’s help or through Marquess Stephenson, Ian’s father. He was involved in their lives as well, considering Ian’s role as the time traveler’s designated protector. Thinking back to her idiot fiancé’s stupid

expression the night of the function in her honor hardened Emma's resolve to settle the issue quickly.

"Oh, leaving so soon already?"

"Y-Yes, I am. I merely wanted to say hello. I'll be taking my leave then."

Bernard promptly spun on his heel, sensing an intangible threat in the atmosphere. To give them some privacy, Ian had considerately moved to a table behind them. He rushed up from his seat and called out to Bernard, but the other boy continued his helter-skelter journey, banging into several chairs on the way. Emma's escort shifted back to his original seat and spoke.

"Is it just my imagination, or did something seem amiss with him?"

"I'll...tell you soon enough."

Highly perceptive, Ian watched Bernard practically flee, his expression perplexed. She knew his keen intuition would eventually hone in on her, seeking to ferret out the truth, but she didn't plan on keeping her time leap into the past a secret from him forever. Especially because he was her closest confidant.

The only problem was figuring out *when* to tell him. *The Stephenson bloodline is an old and noble one that has guarded time travelers for generations. Ian or his relatives might know of a time traveler whose power activated again after losing it.*

For now, though, what mattered was that their classmates in the cafeteria remained blissfully unaware of that dolt being her fiancé. Mission accomplished.



ALTHOUGH the placement exam at the Magic Academy was a written test, all regular examinations after it were equally split between written and oral exams. Because their grades at school directly affected their professional outlooks, everyone worked hard at their studies.

Yet the walls of the dormitory were surprisingly thin. Emma had thought so her first time at the Academy, and her opinion hadn't changed. She heard her

neighbors practicing their spellcraft out loud. One muttered to herself about testing strategies. The thumps and thuds came from practicing for martial arts exams. Many sounds were easily transmitted through the thin walls.

Emma was no exception, having that in common with her classmates. Her first day of lessons had just ended, and she was back in her room in the dormitory. Seated at her desk, she flipped through a thick book. It was a hair catalog she'd purchased a short while ago from a shop.

"I see there are maids working in the royal palace who can change hair color or apply auras using magic..." she mused.

In her first life, after graduating from the Magic Academy, Emma was conferred her very own suite at the royal palace because of her vital role in safeguarding the country. At the time, the government had asked her father, Viscount Seagrove, if he planned to send a maid with her, but she'd told him she didn't need one. Now she regretted the decision since she would have liked to observe a maid's work closely. This book only listed special hairstyles, each requiring mastery of advanced life magic taught at the Academy.

Oh, the princess's hairstyle at the last Foundation Day celebration was based on this one! The Monarchy of Reauxvil's oldest princess was Her Highness, Samantha, eighteen years old. She was admired as a fashion icon by all the girls and young women in the country, from nobles to villagers living on the border.

"This hair color is lovely. Let's see how many incantations it requires... One, two, three... As I suspected, not in my wheelhouse. Well, that's unfortunate." Every hairstyle in the catalog was impossible for Emma to achieve at her current level of ability. "But I want to be able to execute all of them by the time I graduate."

Speaking of life after school, there were two routes she could take to become a lady's maid. The first involved using her father's social network to find work. It was the easiest and most effective method, but the people in her father's network were also connected to Bernard and Annette's families. Emma wanted to avoid any entanglements on that front.

The second path involved excelling at the Academy and using its connections to find work. If she did well here, working for the royal family or a duke fell

within reach. Moreover, should she succeed in obtaining employment in a household that hired many maids, she could become the head housekeeper, which in turn would allow her to continue working there even longer.

All in the Monarchy of Reauxvil considered being a lady's maid a respectable occupation. A fair number of aristocrats even encouraged their daughters to assume employment as maids so that they could broaden their worldly horizons before they married. But Emma's ideals were different.

Hm... I highly doubt a decent marriage for this time traveler will still be in the cards after I break off my exceedingly good match with a count's son. That's why I'll find work with a family outside of our social circle. Without those ties of obligation, I'll be able to work all my life, just like I wish to!

Hope swelling in her chest, Emma sprawled ecstatically on her desk. She thought about her first life when she had earnestly and single-mindedly shuttled back and forth between the future and the present. Then she compared it to this one. In her second life, not only did she have something she truly wanted to do, but she also had the freedom to do it. It made her so happy that she couldn't contain herself.

"Once I graduate from the Magic Academy, I'll find work somewhere wonderful. The royal palace or a noble family—it doesn't matter which. I just want to take care of their daughters. Every day, we'll discuss the best hairstyles and outfits, go shopping together, and more... Oh, and I'll do such an outstanding job protecting them that their mothers and fathers won't have any reason whatsoever to worry... Just like Sunny!"

Her dream grew steadily larger. While she let her imagination run wild, her ear, close to the wall against the desk on which she draped herself, picked up murmurs from the room next door. *Oh...?* She listened thoughtfully in silence. The spell sounded eerily familiar—one from the thick catalog Emma was currently perusing.

What's this...? Perhaps...she's...? She flipped through the pages and found the image she wanted—a young girl with midnight-black hair cut short. She was almost positive the incantation being used next door was one to change a person's hair color to black.

In general, changing hair color was difficult because it required using advanced life magic. But black was even harder. Though the catalog contained the spell “recipes” required for each hairstyle, it astounded Emma that someone at their level of magic was even attempting one. Perhaps her neighbor had dedicated herself diligently to her studies well before entering the Magic Academy.

“Does she hope to become a lady’s maid too?!”

Her eyes twinkled with excitement, and Emma jumped up from the desk, her chair clattering backward. She rushed toward the door, opened it, and went into the hallway to investigate her neighbor. Thirty minutes remained until lights out. Despite today being the evening of the first day of classes, silence reigned throughout the building. Not a word of conversation came from any of the rooms. As of yet, no frivolity or sense of fun was to be found on the school grounds.

I really, really want to greet her, but...perhaps now is not the best time. Her head drooping with disappointment, Emma was about to return to her room when the door in front of her opened with a loud rattle. A young lady stood there.

Her bob-cut gray hair, gleaming mysteriously and barely brushing the tops of her shoulders, seemed at odds with her elegant features. Emma was surprised to see an aristocratic young lady in this school with hair even shorter than her own. And her astonishment was reflected back at her in the other girl’s deep azalea-pink eyes as they observed her.

“My name is Rashida Marie Eslan.”

Her neighbor, who’d been ardently trying to color her hair black, introduced herself first. In contrast to her clear, deep pink irises, the girl’s voice was calm and measured. She followed up her greeting with a shallow curtsy. Though the gesture was simple, there was no denying the beauty and grace of her movements. Inadvertently entranced, Emma snapped out of her daze and hurried to reply.

“I’m Emma Grace Seagrove. I’m so pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Eslan. When Emma realized her neighbor came from a ducal family, she

regretted not introducing herself first. Her disappointment almost crushed her. While she mentally reprimanded herself, something strange about the situation poked at her consciousness.

A young lady belonging to the Duke of Eslan's house... But I don't remember one being in my cohort at the Academy last time. Emma's graduating class had comprised more than five hundred students in her previous life, which meant it had been impossible to memorize each of their names and faces. Yet, in her three years at the Academy, she would have at the very least known of a duke's daughter. It was unnatural that she didn't.

"I couldn't help hearing you through the walls," Rashida began. "I mean, they're so thin and all... I apologize for prying, but..."

When Rashida started the conversation apologetically, Emma noticed that the hairs by her temple glittered golden. *She's actually a blonde, isn't she?* She could no longer contain her excitement and interjected.

"Do you want to be a lady's maid too?!"

They unintentionally said the same thing in unison.

"Yes, I do!"

Even their answers to each other came out the same. They both froze for a second, then burst out laughing simultaneously.

"Would you like to chat in my room until it's time to retire for the night?"

"That would be lovely, thank you!"

Emma cheerfully accepted Rashida's invitation and stepped into her room.



"YOU idolized the maid who looked after you as a child, so you aspire to be like her, hm? My story is similar to yours, Emma."

Just as Emma had heard Rashida's spell practice through their shared wall, so, too, had the other girl listened to Emma enthusiastically talking to herself about her dream. She hadn't realized how high her excitement had been when she'd been making her declarations about taking care of future young ladies. Evidently, though, Emma had been quite loud. *How incredibly embarrassing.*

“Then, Lady Rashida, you also admired your maid at home?”

“Indeed, I did. But, you see, my father... He refuses to pay my dream any heed, saying that a duke’s daughter uses maids, they don’t become one.”

When Emma realized she was about to thoughtlessly agree with the duke’s sentiment, conditioned by societal norms, she forcibly tamped down on her words. She knew how hurtful his opinion was, as someone who had to give up her dream in her previous life due to the demands of her job as a time traveler.

Ultimately, after being convinced by her parents, Emma willingly chose to undertake the responsibility that came with her time affinity. Even so, she regretted not being able to focus on her studies at the Magic Academy due to the demands of her work. Her eyes stung with emotion whenever she recalled her despair the night she realized she couldn’t become a lady’s maid like Sunny.

“If you don’t mind my asking, which field do you intend to specialize in here at the Academy?” Emma asked.

“Father instructed me to focus on general education and advanced wind magic. But...but I plan to apply to my top track, the practical application of life magic.”

“Oh, I want to enroll in that course as well! From what I can see, though, you can already use advanced life magic, Lady Rashida.”

Emma pointedly looked at the gray hair the other girl had dyed via magic. Her real hair color glinted throughout her locks, and there was a lack of actual black. But the fact that she’d accomplished any color change was genuinely impressive, especially since they’d only just started school.

“One of our servants taught me how to do it in secret. But I could only manage two of the five chants necessary, which is why the color turned out like this.”

Rashida grinned playfully, then cackled hysterically at her bumbling execution of magic. Looking at her now, Emma found it hard to believe her initial refined ladylike persona, fit for a duke’s daughter. *I... I really want to be friends with her.* Before she could say as much, Rashida beat her to the punch.

“Emma, won’t you be my friend?”

“Of course! If you’ll have me!”

“Excellent! Please call me Rashida. No need to speak to me so formally, either. I have a strong feeling we’re going to get along swimmingly, and I couldn’t be happier about it!”

“Rashida it is then. And I couldn’t agree more!”

They beamed at each other, radiating delight. By this point in her first life, Emma had already stopped mentioning her dream to become a world-class lady’s maid. Every time she had, her family always looked sad from the guilt they bore after pushing her into taking on the burden of her fate.

But today, Emma made a friend she could talk to freely about her dream. This made her hopeful that her second life was off to a roaring good start. *Though I must admit, I still find it troubling that I never knew about her in the three years I spent at the Academy last time.*

“It’s almost bedtime, so I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Right you are. Good night.”

Despite her lingering worry, Emma bid her new friend farewell and returned to her room, walking on cloud nine.



“**EMMA**, the breakfast in the dormitory cafeteria isn’t to your liking?”

“Hmmm, it’s not that. The truth is... I’m not very good at waking up in the morning. You could say I prefer sleeping in until the last minute than eating breakfast.”

“Oh, my, how unexpected.”

The next day, Emma and her new friend were on their way to school together. She ran into Rashida just as she left her own room after waking up and getting dressed. Incidentally, the other girl’s hair had reverted to her natural blonde from the strangely shining gray last night.

The Magic Academy was built on a large tract of land approximately a kilometer east of the royal capital. The huge plot size was necessary to accommodate nearly two thousand students and faculty. Designed in a star

shape, a moat with clear water surrounded the school grounds. It was a beautiful institution. In the center stood the school building itself, divided into several wings. Each of the eight dormitories was situated near a corner of the star. Besides these structures, a number of shops sold supplies and goods of various sorts. In short, the school could be considered a town unto itself.

There were many school-related matters that couldn't be divulged to outsiders. If, after graduation, someone accidentally or carelessly revealed confidential information they learned at the Academy, they would be subject to severe punishment.

"Morning, Emma. Oh... And Lady Rashida, good morning to you as well."

When they arrived at the main entrance, Ian was already waiting. Yesterday, instead of waiting for her outside, he immediately entered the lecture hall because of the placement exam. But starting today and until they graduated, it seemed he would plant himself patiently by the school building's front in anticipation of her arrival.

"Morning, Ian. You know Rashida?"

Ian smiled at Emma's surprise. "Indeed, I do. The last time we met was a year ago, I believe. I see you're doing well, Lady Rashida. Still as lovely as a lily, hm?"

"I could say the same to you, Lord Ian. I'm honored to be attending school with you. I hope we can be friends, too."

Beaming, Emma watched over them as they exchanged exceedingly polite, aristocratic greetings. In her first life, Annette had always commandeered the spotlight whenever they were all together. Their time at the Academy had been no different. Every day on the walk to their respective classes, she and Ian were always forced to listen to Annette's endless, pointless ramblings.

What made it worse was that the girl herself knew her stories were boring. Emma even remembered Annette privately asking her for advice on topics gentlemen, specifically Ian, enjoyed discussing. Regardless, she had been charmed by Annette's earnest efforts every morning as she watched over her friend, acting like a maiden in love. Thinking back on those seemingly idyllic days, Emma wondered why things had turned out so abominably.

An image of Bernard's face popped into her mind. She viciously shook her head, trying to force it to disappear. But it persisted.

While Emma grappled with herself mentally, Rashida made a comment after her and Ian's formal greetings.

"Hmmm... Might Ian waiting for you mean... Your magical attribute is time, Emma?"

"Oh, yes, that's right." Banishing her former betrothed's face from her mind, Emma responded automatically. Then she noticed the fire burning in Rashida's eyes.

"Emma! I... I'll help you with anything, whether lessons or homework. I know the road to becoming a lady's maid will be exponentially tougher for you because of your other responsibilities, so please don't hesitate to tell me if there's anything I can do for you!"

"Rashida... Thank you so much!"

Captivated by Rashida's passion, Emma unconsciously raised her own voice in delight. It gladdened her tremendously to realize her new friend understood the trials and tribulations that awaited another noble young lady weighed down with an affinity for time magic. *She truly is so knowledgeable, this duke's daughter.* But Ian's dumbfounded voice dimmed some of her elation.

"L... Lady's maid? Did she just... I...lady's maid?"

Returning to reality, Emma forgot that Ian was there with them. As far as he was concerned, she would marry Bernard once her work as a time traveler ended. It was no wonder that confusion and dismay darkened those green eyes, emblematic of beauty itself.

"Um... I'll tell you later. Tonight."

"You most certainly will, and in *great* detail, Emma."

She nodded slowly, considering her options. It wouldn't be long before a time travel request was sent by the country. She needed to tell him the truth—that she had traveled back in time. Not just because he was her close friend but also because she needed his cooperation.

They proceeded to the announcement board to check their class assignments. She wasn't surprised that she, Ian, and Rashida were in the same class. Then she spied a small notice posted on the board.

This year, first-year Class A consists only of students from aristocratic backgrounds.

"Huh? What's the meaning of this?" Emma frowned. She had never seen this notice in her first timeline.

"It might be because of Prince Victor's enrollment," Ian answered.

"Oh, that makes sense," Rashida said. "My older brother was the first prince's, His Highness Wheeler's, classmate. I recall security being quite strict in his time as well."

"I... I see."

Emma nodded at them but remained unsettled at the difference from her original world. Her heart sank as she thought about the ramifications of one or more individuals' lives being irrevocably altered by this change. Unaware of Emma's turmoil, Rashida smiled easily at her.

"I believe Lady Luck favored me on the placement test."

"What do you mean, Lady Rashida?"

"I didn't feel confident in my answers for the magical mathematics proof."

"That was indeed quite difficult."

"I'm glad someone agrees with me."

Ian and Rashida's conversation faded into the background for Emma, consumed by even more worries. *Wait a minute... Rashida and I weren't in the same class the first time. Never mind the same class; I didn't even know of her existence before.*

"Emma, is something the matter?"

"It's nothing, Rashida. I'm fine."

The evidence was mounting about this reality changing bit by bit from the one she knew. Perplexed, she walked with Ian and Rashida into the lecture hall

designated for Class A, composed “only of students from aristocratic backgrounds.” Inside, she noticed many familiar faces, including the second prince, Victor. Seeing his friends, Emma and Ian, he waved to them.

Although this class is one of nobles only, the members are almost the same as last time... Despite her burgeoning fear that she was responsible for affecting the timeline, she felt a measure of relief seeing so many of her good friends from her old life.

“I’m going to speak to His Highness,” Ian said.

“Of course. We’ll see you later, then.”

Once she saw Ian off, Emma turned to question Rashida. But she had a feeling she already knew what her answer would be.

“What about us?”

“Let’s sit up in the front.”

“Funnily enough, I was thinking the same thing.”

Overflowing with energy and motivation, the two of them eagerly descended the stairs of the wide lecture hall and settled into seats in the first row.



THEIR first class prioritized verifying each student’s magical affinity and selecting elective classes. Everyone in the class would undertake general education courses together, but the electives dedicated to different practical skills would be separate. Professor Katie, in charge of Class A, explained.

“Pay attention, everyone. I distributed the forms for attribute determination. Write your name on it, slip it into the water jug on this lectern, and take it out again. When you do that, you’ll know your precise elemental compatibility.”

Precise...compatibility... Rashida thought the same as Emma because she whispered to her friend.

“Most people awaken to their magic during childhood... But perhaps it’s possible that affinity is wrong, and this is why we’re doing this activity?”

“I believe so.”

More accurately, Emma already knew. Because this was how she first learned that, in addition to the element of time, she possessed an aptitude for water, too.

“The paper will be dyed red for those attuned to fire. If someone has an affinity for fire and water, half of the sheet will be red and half blue. It’s also possible to receive inconclusive or weak affinity results. In that case, please tell me immediately for further assistance. Right then, let’s start in order... Young lady! What’s your name?”

“I... I’m Emma Grace Seagrove.”

Emma was called on first by virtue of her seat in the first row. She had no problem being first, per se. It was how the others would react to her affinities that concerned her. Someone like her, who possessed both time and water magics, was considered highly irregular. *Ma’am, I’m a terrible example for your demonstration...*

Sensing Emma’s hesitation, Rashida picked up her pen and started scrawling her name, thinking to volunteer instead. Meanwhile, the teacher cocked her head, puzzled by Emma’s tepid response. Students looked forward to discovering their magical affinity every year, so she found the girl’s discomfiture curious.

“Hm... Seagrove... Seagrove... Ah-ha, you’re the student with the affinity for time.”

In contrast to their teacher’s nonchalant tone, everyone else in the class stirred. Emma didn’t flinch because she’d been expecting it.

“That’s correct. Which is why I think I won’t be helpful for your demonstration.”

“Oh, no need to worry about that. Just write your name on the paper and follow my instructions anyway.”

“I... Yes, ma’am.”

With her name written on her piece of paper, Rashida held it in front of her chest. Using her eyes and hands, she silently asked Emma if she should take her place. Emma smiled and declined her friend’s kind offer with a shake of her

head. She stood up from her seat and walked to where the teacher stood in front of the lecture hall. There, she gently dipped her form into the jug, watching it submerge into the water.

“What in the world...?”

Professor Katie and Emma spoke at the same time. No wonder, too, because Emma’s sheet of paper turned completely black in the blink of an eye.

What is this...? The first time she did this exercise, most of the page turned yellow, indicating her main affinity for time. A small section had been light blue, which meant some affinity for water. It should have been the same.

Except it wasn’t. Pitch black stained the whole page, leaving not a single spot of brightness. *Well, that’s ominous.* She had no qualms about thinking that about herself. None of her classmates could see the paper because the water jug was porcelain. But, once she took it out, there would be mayhem. Of that, she was sure.

“P-Professor...?” Emma glanced at her teacher, who had grown as quiet as a churchmouse, a far cry from her liveliness moments earlier.

“Hm... Miss Emma, you’re absolutely certain you haven’t experienced an affinity for any attributes other than time, yes?”

“That’s correct, ma’am.”

For the longest time, she had wished for an affinity other than, well, time. Unfortunately for her, fate had made other arrangements, so her wish had come to naught in her previous life.

“Fascinating...”

Quite a while had passed since Emma had first gone up to the podium. Though the class had calmed down, everyone started murmuring again. She felt Ian and Victor’s concerned gazes upon her as well.

“Professor, please allow me to test this, too.”

Neither Emma nor Professor Katie noticed the third person approaching the lectern at the front of the lecture hall. As tall as Ian, they cast a shadow over Emma and the teacher, who were both average heights for women. It was

Lester, also known as Glen. *Darn it! Of course, he's in the same class!*

Factoring in his ducal bloodline from the Olano Kingdom, his academic performance made sense. Still, she felt awkward in his presence, though she took two steps back to allow him access to the jug.

"Lor... I mean, Glen. I was under the impression you chose to forgo the attribute judgment because you had already done it in your own country?" Professor Katie said.

"I changed my mind, so please allow me to do so now."

"Oh."

Emma and the professor uttered their surprise in unison. Before he finished his last word, he flipped his sheet over and dropped it into the porcelain vessel. It rested on the surface for a second before slipping into the water.

Ngh! Emma sucked in a startled breath. Glen's form turned black rapidly, too. At the bottom of the jug lay two pieces of pitch-black paper.

What could this mean...? She involuntarily turned her head to stare at him. To her shock, he didn't look surprised, instead smiling back at her, unruffled and almost playful. The hint of childish mischief in his demeanor, so at odds with his clean-cut, handsome features, made Emma's heart race.

"Well... I think the water needs to be replaced, hm?"

"I-I agree!"

Emma unthinkingly responded to Glen's easy, affable tone.

"Hm... Understood. We'll recommence the attribute determination after the water has been replaced. But there is no need for you to perform the exercise again."

"Ack."

That was unacceptable. If her secondary affinity for water wasn't revealed in this class, she couldn't apply to take classes in elemental magic. Her distress must have been clear to Professor Katie because the woman whispered to her.

"Don't worry. I'll explain everything later. Just visit me in my room."

“Y-Yes, ma’am.”

“As I’ve made my point, my work here is done,” Glen said. “I’m sure you’ll agree there’s no need for me to do this again, Professor, since you already know about my testing back home.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Glen spoke quietly so that only the three of them could hear. Having said his piece, he turned on his heel and returned to his seat. It seemed he had been rash in his actions just now. As Emma walked back to her seat, she noticed his two attendants resting their chins in their hands, staring at him in exasperation. One of them made eye contact with her and waved kindly, silently telling her not to worry. She nodded in gratitude before sitting down again.

“Emma... Are you all right?” Rashida asked.

“Yes. Probably. It seems there was something wrong with the water. But the professor said I could perform the test again in private at another time.”

Emma replied as brightly as she could so that Rashida wouldn’t worry about her, but her mind was in shambles with every unbelievable turn of events. *Did he...help me...because he knew something was wrong with the water? Even if he did, why was the professor acting so strangely?*



“**THANK** you for having me, Professor.”

Classes done for the day, Emma went to Professor Katie’s private chamber as her teacher had requested. The faculty residence building was on one corner of the sprawling campus grounds. Just like the student dormitories, it contained private rooms for teachers only. Despite the long, storied history of the Magic Academy, the walls of the faculty residence were so blindingly white that the building looked newly constructed.

“Ah, you’re here.”

“Yes, I am.”

Emma bowed her head politely at her smiling teacher. At the moment, she was less concerned about the reason the paper had turned black and more

about having her water affinity verified.

Which reminds me. In my first timeline, Annette's test indicated she had no compatibility with any of the elemental magics, so the only magic she could specialize in was life magic. Perhaps that happened because she'd never fully developed her inherent aptitude for time... I would hate for the same thing to happen to me this time, as far as water is concerned.

"Right then, Miss Emma, let's discuss your elemental affinity."

While she spoke, Professor Katie flipped through a thick book in her hands and presented a particular page for Emma to view. There was a warning on the spine when she peeked briefly at it. *"Property of the Academy's library. For faculty use only."* Several illustrations depicted every pattern of elemental affinity—those who possessed a singular affinity, multiple affinities, and partial affinities.

"Look here."

Emma saw a pitch-black image in the location her teacher pointed to. *Oh, this is me.* She read the accompanying description out loud.

"The paper will be dyed black for those who possess an affinity for all attributes, otherwise known as an omni-affinity."

What? She blinked, stunned, and raised her face from the book. Professor Katie tapped a finger against her temple with a slightly strained smile, correctly guessing that Emma understood the implication of what she just read.

"Naturally, 'all attributes' includes time, too."

"That...can't be... I mean, I... Last... What?"

Emma silenced herself when she realized she almost blurted out, "Last time." During her time at the Academy in her first life, she experimented on herself to determine if she truly lacked an affinity for the other elements. Regrettably, her results indicated she lacked even basic compatibility with all of them, much less advanced.

"Lor... I mean, Glen," the professor corrected herself. "It was a stroke of luck that he lent a helping hand today. If you had lifted out your black form, rumors

would have spread like wildfire all the way to the government. You would have been summoned forthwith in that case.”

“Wh-What do you mean, ma’am?”

“Because someone with an affinity for all attributes is a much more valuable asset to the monarchy than someone who possesses time magic alone. Especially when you’re the first student in this Academy’s long history to have her attribute determination form turn black. Should you be so inclined, it would be easy for you to find employment as a knight or high-ranked official at the palace after graduation.”

“I don’t have the least bit of interest in such work.”

Emma didn’t have to think before she rejected the idea. She wanted to be a lady’s maid. After time traveling and her government-mandated engagement to Bernard, she had had more than enough of the country’s interference in her life.

“Then we’ll keep this a secret between you, me, and Glen.”

“Um, Professor Katie... I hate to look a gift horse in the mouth...but...are you sure the Academy will allow this?”

Emma admittedly felt let down by such a quick, easy resolution. There’d been an uproar upon the discovery of her affinity with time magic at the age of nine. She had been whisked away to the palace without any say in the matter, and not long after, had to give up her dream of becoming a maid. The fact that this new revelation would be swept under the rug was somewhat anticlimactic in comparison.

“The Magic Academy is a special place that lies outside the monarchy’s jurisdiction. Anything learned here can’t be disclosed to outsiders. You’re familiar with this rule, yes?”

“I am...”

“No doubt there are teachers who wouldn’t hesitate to turn you over to the government. But I’m firmly opposed to such a notion.”

Despite the serious nature of the topic under discussion, Professor Katie

spoke casually about it, as if she were commenting on the weather. Next, she drew out an application form for elective classes.

“For now... How about I list time as your primary affinity and water as your secondary?” she suggested. “The latter shouldn’t raise any red flags since it’s common enough among the female student body. Oh, you can apply to the advanced magic courses if you have one more attribute. Would you prefer we go that route instead?”

“I... Yes, thank you. Um...”

Befuddled, Emma struggled to voice her thoughts. *Do I really have an aptitude for all the attributes? It’s not possible.* Unable to accept reality, she doggedly questioned her teacher.

“Professor Katie, I honestly think this isn’t right. There’s no way I could have an omni-affinity. Might I request that you test me one more time?”

“We can, if that’s what you really wish. Sometimes students *do* find it hard to believe when they discover their compatibility with elements besides any activated in childhood.”

Professor Katie stood up from her chair and moved to a cabinet in her room. Emma assumed she would take out a jug and the special water for testing, but was surprised to see the woman place a sheaf of papers before her.

“You should be familiar with these since they were used in the class-placement exam.”

“Yes... They draw out magic the user has an affinity for but has never used. Crafted from magical materials, these sheets of paper transform into the element the individual is compatible with.”

Emma utilized this paper in the experiments she conducted on herself to determine her affinity for other magics. The only reaction was water. Not a twitch of a change for any of the others. Expecting the same result, she nevertheless placed the first sheet on her palm as it would be discourteous to her teacher if she didn’t at least make an effort. Then she said the requisite chant.

“Fire magic, spark.”

Emma could manipulate life magic to light a stove, but she could never produce fire. Knowing nothing would come of it, she uttered the familiar words. One of her older brothers had an affinity for fire magic, and she'd heard him say them often enough.

Good lord!!! The palm-sized square paper burst into flames that reached the ceiling. *This isn't a spark at all!* Caught off guard, Emma fell to the floor on her backside.

"Oh, dear, are you all right?" Professor Katie remained unfazed as she easily extinguished the fire Emma had created.

"I... Yes... I think so... Professor, what just happened...?"

Tears spilled from her eyes. She could *not* comprehend any of this. A burning stench lingered in the air. Emma idly speculated that her fringe was most likely destroyed now. She thought about asking Rashida to fix her hair, but the damage was probably beyond her capabilities. The shock of what she'd done had her brain thinking about all the wrong things. A distant, sensible part of her understood she was in a mental freefall, but she couldn't stop it either.

"Mm-hmm. Such incredible force confirms your affinity with fire. Would you like to try your hand at the others? Though if your attempt just now was any indication, I think it's quite likely that we'll both end up soaking wet, our hair in disarray, surrounded by clouds of dirt. Or in whichever order you choose to test yourself. What say you?"

"I... I believe I'll refrain from further tests."

She could imagine the potential for further disaster with the other elements based on what she had done with fire. It confounded her to no end, especially because of her fruitless efforts in her past life. Convinced by her teacher's sound argument, Emma decided no more tests was the best course of action.

"So what would you like to do about your elective courses? Remember, if you add another element to your profile, you can apply to take the advanced classes."

"Um... May I request that you add wind as my third element?"

"Wind it is. Then, as I explained in class today, all you have to do is fill out the

form with the electives you want to take and turn it in by next week. Make sure to include your class-placement exam results too.”

“Understood. Thank you very much.”

Emma still felt like she’d been bespelled by a magic fox, but she was grateful for her teacher’s kindness all the same. Professor Katie’s formal stamp of approval regarding her elemental attributes meant the world to her. She would no longer hound the woman with her own misgivings.

As far as why she’d chosen wind as her third attribute...to match with Ian. Simple as that. Even if they had to skip classes because of her time traveling duties, she could easily practice wind magic with him through any supplementary lessons they may need to take to make up for their absences.

Emma thanked Professor Katie and left her room. While she fussed with her burned forelocks, she belatedly realized something. *Wait just a minute. If a pitch-black form means the person is attuned to all the elements, then...*

In the next instant, she ran into the very person on her mind. He had apparently been waiting for her outside of Professor Katie’s room.

“All done?”

“You...”

“Hello, Miss Emma Grace Seagrove. Might I borrow you for a bit?”

“...Of course.”

Though Emma had decided to stop pretending, she couldn’t help proffering a polished, ladylike smile. And for some strange reason, she suddenly stopped caring about the faint, charred smell wafting from her singed fringe.



GLEN led her to a bower situated some distance from the lounge area in the school’s courtyard. Most likely because the common area and cafeteria were too conspicuous. This particular shaded bower rested between the common area and a garden often used by students for trysts with their lovers. Its location made it a well-kept secret because students were careful not to pass through it. Having studied and lived at the Academy for three years, Emma set out to use

this spot to talk to Glen. But she was frankly astonished to learn he knew of it as well.

“Miss Emma, was that the first time you took the attribute test?”

“Yes...”

Sort of, she added mentally. His lips curled as if he knew she lied. Emma honestly didn’t hold a positive impression of Glen. If she had truly met him for the first time yesterday, she was certain she would have exclaimed over him in delight and excitement like the rest of the girls.

Unfortunately, he had made the worst impression on her at the royal party, their true first meeting. Logically, she knew the Glen in front of her wasn’t to blame for the Glen four years from now. Even so, she barely restrained herself from treating him coldly. She spoke to him, doing her best to maintain a polite, neutral attitude.

“I... I went to talk to Professor Katie about the paper turning black and learned that it wasn’t indicative of something wrong with the form or the special water.”

“Interesting. Which means your original result was different?”

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at, but all I know is that my primary affinity should have been with the element of time, accompanied by a slight affinity for water.”

“And you’re absolutely sure of it?”

Glen leaned against a tree, staring directly at her. He clearly found the incident strange, too, yet Emma wasn’t certain she could give him the answer he sought since she was still perplexed. Gazing at the budding leaves carried by a spring breeze, she nodded slowly in response. What she *did* know was the truth behind the paper turning black. In that case—

“Lord Glen... You possess an affinity for time as well, don’t you? This is the first time I’ve met someone else with the same power.”

“Hm. Same for me.”

“Is traveling to the past also forbidden in the Olano Kingdom?” she asked.

“...And pray tell why you would ask such a question?”

“Oh, um... Curiosity, I suppose.”

Emma fumbled for a reasonable answer at Glen’s unexpected interrogative riposte. She’d asked him because of his presence in the Academy during her second chance at life when he hadn’t shown up the first time until their third and final year. She was still trying to solve that puzzle.

But this world only had one timeline. If the past changed, it would rewrite the future to reflect that. The only ones who would know the difference were time travelers. As one herself, Emma knew this indisputable fact better than anyone. Which led her to think that Glen’s existence in this reality was her fault, regardless of his affinity with time.

I don’t know exactly how he came to be here, two years earlier than last time. The only conclusion I can draw is it has something to do with me. She realized she had asked him the wrong question.

“Well... It is essentially forbidden, yes...” he finally answered. “But due to the extreme rarity of those attuned with time magic in the first place, no one really knows how to utilize the ability.”

“Forgive me, but...it sounds like you might have used your power for your own ends.”

“No comment.”

“Wh-What do you mean by that?!”

His shocking reply made Emma forget about her facade, allowing her real self to leak through. Glen started in surprise for a beat, before a smile lit up his handsome face.

“That’s for me to know and you to find out, hm?”

“Well, I’ve never used the ability for selfish reasons. I haven’t even *thought* about it!” she shot back.

“Good. Better that way. Otherwise, there’s a chance that even the moments you cherish, the ones that sustain you in painful times, will vanish.”

Emma fell silent. She couldn’t bring herself to ask him more because of the

sadness she saw on his face. A strong gust of wind buffeted them. The trees surrounding them swayed. Countless leaves fell and fluttered in the air. She instinctively closed her eyes against the sudden blast.

Once it swept by, Emma lifted her eyelids. Glen was right in front of her, even though he'd been five paces away a second ago.

"Ngh! I— What—"

"Hold still. A few leaves are stuck in your hair."

Before she could ask him what in the world he thought he was doing, she realized he was fixing her tousled locks. She promptly froze. *What now?*

The nerves she experienced when he took her hand during the dinner party returned. She had no reason to feel uneasy. He was just doing her a favor. But no amount of logic stopped her heart from beating hard and fast. His unique scent didn't calm her down either. She didn't know if it was cologne or something else, but he smelled different from Ian and Bernard.

Desperate to keep the tension from showing on her face, Emma pressed her lips together tightly and endured his ministrations. Another powerful gust of wind rushed by. Then she felt a drop of water on her forehead. *Is it...raining...?*

When she tilted her head up, her gaze met Glen's. His cheeks seemed somewhat flushed.

"Miss Emma... Did you know?"

"What?"

Glen's tone of voice was perfectly normal and calm. She must have imagined the red staining his cheeks as well as the droplet of water. *A trick of the twilight and my own mind.*

"That magic requires emotional control."

"I do... But why are you..."

This being her second time attending the Magic Academy, such a concept was child's play to her. Yet she sensed she was missing something important about the meaning of this conversation, so she tilted her head curiously at him. Glen broke eye contact and laughed softly.

“Never mind. You don’t need to know why. Right then... I believe that should do it. I must applaud myself for a job well done, considering how turbulent I’m feeling on the inside.”

“Huh? Yes, um, th-thank you very much.”

He finished plucking all the leaves out of her hair. Emma thanked him, quickly bid him farewell, and turned to walk the path leading to dormitory eight. Once she exited the garden, she ran. She remembered her promise to Ian to meet him that night.

I have to hurry. Oh, if there’s still time before lights out, I’ll ask Rashida if she knows any magic to fix my hair. She reached up to touch her atrociously burned fringe and...found it in its original, pristine state.

“What in the world...?”

Her usually silky locks brushed over her fingers.



“EMMA!”

Several days later, Emma was walking to the school building from her dormitory when a sickly-sweet voice stopped her.

“Oh... Hello, Annette.”

Rashida had left earlier because she’d been itching to consult with their teacher on something, so Emma was on her own. Now she cursed her own inability to wake up early like a normal person. She could have avoided running into Annette.

It was the first time she’d encountered the other girl since her arrival in this second life. Memories of the last time she’d seen Annette, sobbing hysterically after having just awakened to her time affinity at the royal function, flooded back. Emma’s blood boiled all over again, so she forced herself to breathe in and out deeply to calm herself. Along with Bernard, Annette was also now someone she didn’t want to reveal her true self to.

“I’m so happy to finally see you! Honestly, Emma, you’re so cruel. I waited forever for you on move-in day, but you never showed up!”

“I’m sorry. I overslept and barely made it in time as it was.”

Annette puffed her cheeks in a deliberate pout, her usual method of inducing guilt in others. Emma apologized sincerely, realizing she might have forgotten their promise.

“Water under the bridge. What do you say we have lunch today? Lord Bernard graciously invited me, so I was thinking the childhood trio could reunite! After all, it’s been some time since the three of us were together.”

“Ah, unfortunately, I can’t. I promised Ian to spend every moment with him during our time at the Academy.”

Emma lied easily, not feeling a twinge of guilt. There was no rule this strict between her and Ian. She just didn’t want to give Bernard the opportunity to declare her his fiancée if she dined with him in the cafeteria. Accordingly, she tried her best to feign regret while shaking her head as sadly as she could.

“You must be joking! Lord Bernard has been inviting me to spend time with him often lately, but...it’s different now that we’re older. I have no idea what to say to him when it’s just the two of us. Which is why I really wanted you to join us, Emma!”

“Heh heh. You should be yourself, Annette. After all, you two have *always* been incredibly close, haven’t you?”

Sure enough, Emma realized Bernard had already begun subtly wooing Annette. Yet she felt not an ounce of anger welling up. The more she talked to Annette, the more she wanted to counsel the other girl because her friend couldn’t help being a people pleaser. *Clearly, Annette doesn’t realize what Bernard is up to, but she doesn’t seem particularly displeased by his invitations, either, so I won’t interfere.*

“Hm. I’ll have to think about that. Well, I should get going now. My classroom is really far since I’m in the lowest class. I’ll see you again soon, Emma!”

Annette waved cheerfully and rushed off. Emma watched her go in silence.

“Any issues?”

“None at all.”

Ian stepped out of his hiding spot nearby and spoke to Emma. He'd kept an eye on them the whole time.

"You know... I still find it unbelievable that those two will hurt you in the future, Emma."

She had kept her promise to him several days earlier and told him everything. That four years from now, when she went to bed the night her time magic disappeared, she woke up the next day having returned to the spring of her fifteenth year. That she didn't think this time leap was of her own making because she had verified the number zero on her sigil on top of receiving the medal of merit from the king himself for her services to the nation. Though Ian had been astounded by her tale, he had accepted it as within the realm of possibility. Except for one thing.

"Do you truly intend to become a lady's maid now?" he asked. "All because Bernard broke off your engagement?"

Despite several days having passed, he remained dubious about her dream of becoming a maid.

"Yes, absolutely! I said it before, and I'll say it again. I want to become a lady's maid like my idol. You can't imagine my despair four years from now after our engagement was called off. I finally gained the freedom to live how I wanted, but it was too late to become the maid I'd aspired to be as a child. The fact that I can attend the Academy again is like a dream come true," she gushed.

"In that case, I have no choice but to support you, hm? Don't make me regret this, though, Emma." Ian sighed, smiling in exasperation.

Emma was boundlessly grateful to have such a heartening soul by her side. She couldn't have asked for a better friend or protector.



FIRST-YEAR students at the Magic Academy received an extensive foundation in general education and beginner magic. Once they completed this part of their curriculum, they were allowed to choose electives geared toward the professions they aspired to enter after graduation.

For example, spell chanting was required to activate magic. To use spells,

students had to be familiar with the magical language created exclusively for incantations. The language itself had its own vocabulary and grammar, so students had to master it like they would any other foreign language to say the spells correctly. When the first-years completed the basics of the fundamentals themselves, only then could they begin on the practical applications of magic.

“I-I can’t create wind! Why?!”

Emma collapsed onto the soft, fluffy carpet of grass.

“Isn’t it your first time, though?” Rashida asked. “Which means your inability to do so is a given. I know you’re frustrated because everyone else has been able to manage it, but...most of the students in this class awakened to their wind affinity as children. There’s no merit in comparing yourself to people with experience, so take a deep breath and try again!”

“You’re right, Rashida. I needed to hear that. Thank you. Here I go!”

Encouraged by her friend’s gentle words, Emma stood up again, shaking off the tufts of grass clinging to her white uniform. One month had passed since her second first day at the Magic Academy. They were in the school’s courtyard practicing elementary wind magic. Emma had been looking forward to applying the knowledge from their lectures in a real-world setting. Unfortunately for her, though, all she could manage was a great deal of nothing, despite her best efforts.

Ostensibly, the use of elemental magic wasn’t allowed until after one had enrolled at the Magic Academy. There was grave potential for danger if mentally and emotionally inexperienced children lost control of their magic. On the other hand, mastering magic became increasingly difficult as time passed, particularly for adults. That was why the Magic Academy had been established in the first place. An individual’s three years at the school would teach them how to control magic properly.

Despite the public law, the reality was that most of the students had awakened to their particular magical affinities as children. By the time they started lessons at the Academy, they could already cast simple spells and use novice magic. Compared to them, Emma had a lot of catching up to do because it hadn’t been long since she’d learned of her compatibility with the attribute of

wind.

I can't believe I forgot those special pieces of paper that only amplified magical energy for testing purposes. What a fool I was for believing it would be that easy to train myself on the other elements. While lamenting her own shortsightedness, Emma raised both hands, palms facing upward, and attempted the spell again.

"Wind magic, puff."

A tremendous *whoosh* sounded from behind her. When she turned around, the wind she called forth was violently lashing the nearby trees. Leaves rained down everywhere.

"I..I'm so sorry!"

Emma apologized profusely to their classmates underneath the branches, covered in leaves. Not only was the wind not a puff, it wasn't even contained to her palms. Another failure.

"Emma. The fact that you can create whirlwinds like this is a good sign. Once you get the knack for it, your skill will improve quickly. I know it, so don't worry."

"Rashida..."

Her friend's overwhelming kindness made Emma want to cry. *It had been so much easier to control water magic in my first life, so why can't I do the same now?* While she frowned, mulling the issue intently, she sensed a familiar presence standing next to her. A mature scent wafted from the individual. Bergamot and sandalwood. Aromas decidedly lacked in boys her age. She knew who it was without turning her head to look.

"Miss Emma, you have an affinity for water and wind, yes? Including time, a total of three. You should use the method most appropriate for each."

"Hello, Lord Glen."

Leaning against a nearby tree, arms folded, his stare had been unabashedly direct as he watched her fail again and again at beginner wind magic. She knew he had been there the whole time. Emma also knew that the other girls in their

class were entirely focused on him, though at first glance they seemed to be taking the lesson seriously. Frankly, the whole situation made her uncomfortable, so she'd been ignoring him, not wanting to get tangled up in any drama. His scrutiny only made her more determined to succeed in using wind magic.

"Then... You're saying you have a special technique for each type of elemental magic?"

"Correct. You may be an omni-affinity, but the element you're using right now is wind. I suggest you use your head a little more and consider what that means."

"Why, you!"

Emma couldn't help retorting angrily at his biting remark. When she did, a few of the girls watching him shrieked indignantly. Glen's personality matched his sharp, clean features. To put it bluntly, cool at best, ruthless at worst. He didn't hide behind social niceties at all. Needless to say, aristocratic young ladies who'd never been treated so coldly by gentlemen before found him irresistible. And the more he revealed his real character, the larger his fan base grew.

In my first life, I always wondered why so many girls had gone off the deep end where he was concerned. To think this was why. But she knew he had repaired the fire damage she'd inflicted on her hair. When she tried to thank him for it the next day, he dodged the topic, giving her the slip in short order to boot.

Sometimes she wondered if she had dreamed up the kindness this shockingly uncouth son of a duke had displayed toward her. Not to mention his outrageous behavior upon their first meeting four years from now. If he had the audacity to kiss the hand of a girl he barely knew then, what kind of mayhem would he get up to in the meantime? For whatever reason, the young man in question seemed unperturbed by Emma's frosty glare. His voice was exceedingly soft when he spoke for her ears only.

"The basic principle is the same even if you possess all the elemental affinities. It may prove challenging to exert control so suddenly, but... Regardless, focus on the attribute you're using now. Or was all your talk of

becoming an excellent maid just that?”

Controlling magic became harder the more affinities a person had. Though Glen’s attitude annoyed her to no end, she privately conceded he was the veteran as far as the elemental magics were concerned. Despite being grateful for his advice, Emma’s response was mulish.

“Fine. I’ll do as you say, *sir*.”

She held her hands aloft again, palms facing upward.

“What matters isn’t the spell itself, but the image you hold in your mind,” he said. “I visualize something different depending on which element I’m using.”

Concrete advice filtered down to her from his superior height. Heeding his words, Emma pictured Seagrove Manor’s garden. A relaxed, soothing breeze wound through it on a warm, sunny day. Her beloved idol, Sunny, was with her. She almost felt like she was there again.

This feels right. I think I can do it this time. Keeping the gentle touch of the wind from her memory in mind, she chanted once more.

“Wind magic, puff.”

A tiny, whirling gust of wind hovered in her hands. When she carefully brought it close, her hair fluttered silkily in the gentle breeze.

“Emma! I knew you could do it!”

She could tell from Rashida’s tone of voice that her friend was impressed.

“I did, didn’t I?! Goodness, I actually did it!”

After dozens of attempts, Emma finally succeeded at elementary wind magic. While she and Rashida squealed excitedly, their teacher noticed the hubbub and approached them.

“Well, well, good job, Miss Emma. And what a lovely shape it has. I know it took a bit of time and effort, but it paid off, hm? I’m certain you’ll improve even more henceforth.”

“Thank you very much!”

Wanting to thank Glen for his precise advice, Emma turned to look up at him

next to her. Except...he was already gone. She glanced around, searching for him, and spotted him walking away with a friend back to their classroom. His companion was the boy who had kindly waved at her during their first class after her disastrous attribute test.



Blast you! You could have at least let me express my gratitude first, you oaf!

“Emma, we need to get ready for our next class. Why don’t we head back as well?”

“O-Of course. A sound plan.”

She had sorely wanted to share her happiness with him at having successfully produced her first bit of wind magic. Feeling somewhat lost and deflated, she curled her fingers into tight fists. All Emma could do was watch Glen walk away.

First Year at the Magic Academy: Summer

A school year at the Magic Academy consisted of three terms: spring, fall, and winter. For Emma, spring term in her first year flew by in a flash, just like the first time she went to the Academy.

“Emma, you had better visit me over the summer recess,” Rashida insisted. “I won’t take no for an answer, especially because there’s someone I want you to meet. Swear to me, you will.”

“Of course! And I’ll be expecting your letters!”

The Academy’s summer holiday started today. Most of the students would return home for the long recess. Both Emma and Rashida’s family homes were within the royal capital, so geographically speaking, they wouldn’t be going far. It would be easy for them to fulfill their promise to visit. Emma waved her friend off with a smile as the other girl boarded her family’s coach.

“Well, Emma, I see you’ve made a close enough friend in Lady Rashida to call upon her during the summer holiday as well, hm?”

Emma nodded in response to Ian’s question. “Indeed. Besides that, though, I plan on remaining at home, so there’s no need for you to worry, Ian.”

Despite Ian’s incessant pampering, Emma was motivated to return home. Once there, she intended to speak to her father about her goal of becoming a lady’s maid. In truth, she was already taking many classes to further her aim without his knowledge. As far as her parents were concerned, once her responsibilities as a time traveler ended, they believed she would marry Bernard. Her dream most likely wouldn’t pose a problem. No, her desire to call off her engagement with him would turn their faces pale.

Various families’ carriages lining the street in front of the Academy’s main gate created a lively atmosphere. Some students would return to their homes in faraway parts of the monarchy, while others would depart for destinations unknown to enjoy their holidays. The air around her vibrated with everyone’s

impatient fervor to make the most of their two-month recess. Emma, too, was eager to get the show on the road.

Yet she didn't spy Glen's figure among the crowd. Although he made the worst possible impression he could at the dinner party in her honor, much to her surprise, he proved himself to be a fount of strength in her second life. As a fellow individual who possessed an affinity with all the elements, he would often counsel her in secret during practical lessons. He hunted down magical tomes he deemed would be helpful in her journey to control her magic more easily and skillfully. Their first meeting had been atrocious, but she and Glen built an unexpectedly solid friendship over the past few months. *I wanted to say goodbye to Lord Glen. From the looks of it, he's already left.*

Emma's spirits sank when she realized she most likely wouldn't see him again until the start of the new term. *This won't do.* She shook off her melancholy and boarded the Seagrove coach, which would carry her back to her family manor.



"I'M home!"

"Emma!"

When she stepped into the foyer, she didn't even get to put her luggage down before her mother embraced her tightly. She'd apparently been lying in wait for her daughter. Seeing her mother's face after such a long time away comforted Emma. Not a moment later, her stomach rumbled as a sweet scent entered her nostrils. It permeated the whole house.

"Something smells delicious, Mother!"

"The fruit tart you love so much is baking as we speak. Let's have tea right away, hm?"

"Excellent!"

"My lady, might I suggest you indulge in a bath first? Today is quite warm, after all." Jamie waited politely for mother and daughter to finish their exchange before she spoke, smiling at Emma's sparkling eyes. She was one of the maids at Seagrove Manor, and she stood patiently next to Emma's mother.

At this point, it had been three years since Sunny went back to her hometown to marry. Jamie was her replacement, so her primary duties involved looking after Emma. They both headed to her room, where she found that Jamie had already drawn a bath for her in the ensuite. Emma talked to her while she was preparing to step into the tub.

“You’ve been here three years now, yes, Jamie? Did you attend the Magic Academy before your employment with us?”

“That’s correct. Although I’m a commoner, I was granted entrance to the Academy. But, thanks to that opportunity, now I can work gainfully with your family.”

Jamie was one of Sunny’s distant relatives. Emma’s mother took a liking to the town girl, judging her as having outstanding potential. So she asked Jamie if she’d like to work for them.

Broadly speaking, aristocratic young ladies in the Monarchy of Reauxvil only worked as ladies’ maids as one facet of their societal education. On the other hand, only a handful of commoners could succeed in becoming a lady’s maid. That demonstrated Jamie’s superior caliber as an individual. *Jamie made her dream come true, hm?*

Moving briskly, Emma’s maid picked up a few lumps of bath salts. Emma knew she would choose the most suitable one once she gauged how her mistress felt based on her expression and attitude. On a stand beside her were: two large bath towels, three towels big enough to wrap her hair in, a bathrobe, body cream, a pitcher overflowing with citrus fruit, and a glass next to it. *After this, she’ll lay out a change of clothes for me, dry my hair using magic, and pamper my hair with an oil treatment. How sublime.*

Being able to chase her dream after giving up on it before made Jamie’s every action seem dazzling. As she watched her maid’s flowing, graceful movements, her heart fluttered, thinking about the as-yet-unknown young lady she would someday care for.



TEATIME awaited Emma after her bath. Her father returned in the meantime and joined in the afternoon repast. It was the first occasion in months they had

a happy family get-together.

She looked at the scrumptious fruit tart on the table. The fruits possessed a glossy sheen from their syrupy goodness, and the mountain of fresh whipped cream made her mouth water. Despite lacking a strong aroma, the black tea provided a refined, glorious accompaniment to the pastry. *Jamie has a superb sense for food.*

But Emma couldn't let herself be distracted by teatime. She had a goal to accomplish. Though she was loath to put a damper on the lively conversation surrounding her mother's freshly baked tart, she knew she had to assert herself. She cleared her throat and addressed her father.

"Father, I'd like to discuss something with you."

Her father, smiling in delight at seeing his daughter again for the first time in months, was startled. He had been about to ask her how life at school fared.

"What's the matter, daughter? There's no need to be so stiff with your old man. Ack, don't tell me it's what I think it is."

Correctly guessing what Emma was about to say, her father grimaced and returned his teacup to its saucer.

"You are correct, sir. As I mentioned in my letters, I request the dissolution of my engagement with Count Sagden's son, Lord Bernard. One of the reasons for this betrothal was to reward me for my time affinity, yes? Well, I politely decline it as I do not require such a *prize*."

Sighing heavily, her father kept silent and closed his eyes, arms folded. She had written to him several times over the past few months about this matter, but he had doggedly refused to allude to it in any of his replies.

"You're talking nonsense, Emma. Marrying into the Sagden family means securing lifelong stability for yourself. I know you carry a heavy burden right now, but once your work is done, you can live comfortably as a countess. What about this do you find so distasteful and unsatisfying?" One of her older brothers interjected, his tone incredulous at her temerity.

If you're so bloody enamored by being joined to a count's bloodline, why don't you marry that faithless scoundrel instead? Emma knew she couldn't say that

out loud. Tamping down the temptation to lash out at him, she made an imperious declaration.

“Because I want to be a lady’s maid!”

“Oh, Emma... Please don’t tell me you’re still stuck on that silly dream?”

Her mother’s eyes widened in dismay. Emma’s true motivation for calling off the engagement was that she didn’t want to marry a worthless man like Bernard, but her family would be devastated if she revealed the particulars to them. Eventually, everyone would discover the truth about Bernard and Annette’s relationship. There was nothing she could do about that. Yet Emma thought it prudent to use her dream as a pretext instead of hinting at such an unsavory situation.

“Yes, Mother, I am, in fact, ‘stuck’ on my ‘silly’ dream. I gave up on it once after my time magic awakened, but the longer I studied at the Magic Academy, the stronger my desire to be a maid grew. I couldn’t let go of it.”

She gazed unflinchingly at her father, the head of their house. Her parents had always spoiled her. Emma took up her facade of a good girl because she’d been afraid that if she had honestly told them about all her selfish whims, Viscount and Viscountess Seagrove would have done everything in their power to satisfy their only daughter.

She realized this at nine when her time affinity revealed itself. If she had wished to hide her ability, her father would have acceded without a thought. But it would have meant defying the will of the monarchy, and she couldn’t bear to see him punished for her selfishness. So she pretended to accept the situation, quickly giving up on her dream without a fuss.

“So that’s how you’ve felt all this time, eh? Might I also presume that you’re not interested in being a maid for a few years before marrying?”

Her father’s question was reasonable since he described the normal route for ladies from lower-ranked aristocratic families. Strictly speaking, she wasn’t opposed to such a commonly traveled path. But Emma knew herself well enough to realize that she would inevitably chafe at the time restrictions involved. More importantly, the issue was specifically with *Bernard* as her fiancé.

I won't deny either that there's a small part of me hoping for a love marriage instead, one devoid of talk regarding familial alliances and such hogwash. The minute this thought popped into her head, an image of a young man with silver hair and pale purple eyes flashed through her mind. Panicked by her confused musings, Emma hurriedly shook her head to focus on the matter at hand.

"You're correct, Father. I... I want to work at the royal palace! Um... More precisely...I've always wanted to serve the young princesses."

To secure employment at the royal palace, a maid had to remain unmarried for a myriad of reasons. She blurted it out without thinking, but upon closer reflection, she realized perhaps her subconscious had found a way to speak her truth. This reason matched her situation the best right now.

"The royal palace, hm...? I see... Truth be told, Emma, my girl, ever since your first letter mentioning your request, I've been obliquely determining if Count Sagden would be amenable to it. Unfortunately...the man is quite chuffed at having gained the rank of Count because of the engagement. So calling it off might lead to a bit of strife."

"I'm aware of the possibility, sir. Even so, I beseech you to try. I... Please forgive me for being so selfish, Father."

As she bowed her head deeply in remorse, her father spoke again thoughtfully.

"Raise your head, my girl. There's no need to apologize. I only agreed to the engagement in the first place because I thought it would make you happy. I'll do what I can. I only ask that you give me some time. I need to lay the groundwork first."

"Of course, Father. Truly, thank you a million times over. You'll never know how much this means to me!"

Now my whole family knows about my intent to accomplish my dream. I hope they can come to terms with it. Once I find definitive proof of Bernard's infidelity, I can use it to easily call off the engagement. That will be my last resort if Count Sagden digs in his heels.

Once her mother and older brothers tacitly acquiesced to Emma's request

and her father's promise, the family's conversation turned to her beloved idol and Jamie's distant relative, Sunny. They reminisced fondly about her for some time. *Oh, I just remembered that Sunny and I ate this very fruit tart the day she left to return home.*

Nostalgic, Emma dug her fork into her portion and scooped up a huge morsel. Without hesitation, she lifted it to her mouth and swallowed. The sweet, slightly sour taste represented happiness to her. She vaguely recalled eating the same thing on her first day of summer break in her first life. Savoring the blissful moment, Emma felt not an iota of anxiety as her second life sailed on smoothly.



JUST like she had told Ian, Emma spent most of her long summer vacation at Seagrove Manor. She went into the city once to go shopping, accompanied by Ian. Her purpose for the trip was to buy gifts for Rashida so she could prepare to visit her friend's house. She bought black tea that she thought Rashida would like, a selection of candies on display in sparkling glass jars, the newest hair catalog, and a book focused on accessorizing outfits. Besides that, she waited for Rashida to invite her. She even sent her friend a simple letter detailing the recent happenings in her life. But she received no response.



"EMMA, you're in high spirits today."

At Ian's words, she schooled her features better to reveal less of her emotional state. The new term started tomorrow. Normally, students returned to campus on the day of the first term and moved into their dormitories after classes ended. But Emma asked Ian to pick her up the day before school started again, and now they rode in the Stephenson coach back to the Academy.

"I haven't been able to get in touch with Rashida. I sent her a letter, but no reply came," she explained.

"Hmm... That's quite unusual, even if she had gone on vacation."

"I thought so too! I hope nothing serious occurred."

Emma nursed a tinge of worry. *I haven't forgotten that I didn't even know of Rashida's existence the first time I went to the Magic Academy.* Her friend was

not only intelligent but strikingly beautiful. Moreover, *the* Duke Eslan's daughter. It was nigh impossible for Emma to *not* know someone of her station over her three years at the Academy.

Which led her to arrive at a particular conclusion. It wasn't that she had never noticed Rashida's presence in her first life, but that Rashida hadn't been there in the first place. *I remember her saying she'd forced her way to school despite her family's opposition to her dream of becoming a lady's maid. She even changed her specialization in secret... Then, is it possible they found out?* Emma grimaced at the ominous thought.

There was only one school of magic in the Monarchy of Reauxvil, but each of the nation's political neighbors also had their own magic schools. For high-ranking nobles, it wasn't unusual to send their sons and daughters as exchange students to one to broaden their societal knowledge. The Eslan family was one of the most prominent, noble lines in the country. Should the duke feel so inclined, it would be mere child's play for him to transfer his daughter to a foreign school in the middle of the academic year.

All Emma wanted to do was return to the Academy as soon as possible, thus their trip a day early. She wanted to shake off her fear and ascertain with her own eyes that Rashida's room remained unchanged in their dormitory. Yet it wasn't meant to be.



“THE Academy received a notice of withdrawal for Rashida Eslan, daughter of Duke Eslan.”

Professor Katie's words rendered Emma speechless. Even though she had imagined the worst-case scenario, reality still shook her. In contrast, Ian remained calm, speaking on behalf of his friend and charge.

“What do you mean, ma'am?”

“Our school allows students to choose which field of study to specialize in, but... It seems Miss Rashida's plans for her future didn't quite adhere to her father's.”

I knew it!

“Thank you very much, Professor.”

Pale-faced, Emma barely managed to thank her teacher before bolting outside.

“Emma! Where are you going?!” Ian called after her.

“To Rashida’s house. Ian, will you come with me?”

“Of course, you don’t even have to ask. I’ve been to the Eslan residence with Father before, so fear not. I know the way.”



DUKE Eslan’s estate was a bit far from the heart of the royal capital. Many aristocrats’ mansions lined the streets in this district, creating a miniature town of noble residences. Each dwelling and the plot it rested on were so large, though, that the miniature town felt like a world unto itself, where even time passed leisurely. Any visitors to this locale could be forgiven for thinking they had left the capital entirely.

“You say you wish to speak to Lady Rashida...?” The gatekeeper looked troubled by Emma and Ian’s unexpected arrival.

“That’s right. My name is Emma Grace Seagrove, and I’m in the same class as her at the Magic Academy.”

“I apologize, but...the master has decreed that Lady Rashida is not to receive any visitors.”

He won’t even allow her friends to see her?! What in the world happened? The situation was much worse than Emma had imagined.

“Hello, sir. I hope you remember me from my last visit.” Then Ian stepped forward, taking the reins.

“If I recall correctly... You’re Marquess Stephenson’s son, Lord Ian, yes?”

“To be honest, I received a letter from Duke Eslan and am here today to fulfill his request. Specifically, I have something for Lady Rashida. Might we call upon her now?”

Ian smiled charmingly and flashed something resembling a letter from his

breast pocket to the guardsman. Defeated by her friend's overwhelming brilliance, the gatekeeper opened the door to the mansion and ushered them inside, where a maid guided them to Rashida's room. It was located on a section of the third floor that received the most sunlight. The woman spoke once they arrived at her friend's door.

"My lady has been despondent for quite some time now... So please be aware that she may not agree to see you."

"Thank you for informing us." Once Emma nodded, the woman knocked on Rashida's door. She rapped it twice.

"I'm sorry... I don't need any tea..." Rashida's voice trickled out faintly from the other side.

"Rashida? It's me, Emma. Can we talk? Just for a bit...?"

Silence. And then footsteps pounded on the floor before the door opened with excessive force.

"Emma!"

The instant before her friend threw her arms around her, Emma noted Rashida's puffy eyes. They were so red and swollen that she suspected the other girl must have been crying for the entirety of their summer recess.

"Rashida! I was so shocked when I found out you withdrew from school that I had to rush over to see you," Emma said. "What happened?"

"...Come in."

Emma stepped inside her friend's pitch-black room. Ian waited outside, giving them privacy. The maid followed the two of them in and opened the curtains, sending light flooding through the windows, brightening the interior. Emma's heart squeezed in pain, seeing Rashida flinch like she hadn't seen sunlight in far too long.

"It... It was the third day of our summer recess. My report card from the Academy arrived." Rashida spoke slowly, haltingly. "Father looked at it and... He found out I had chosen to major in life magic for those aiming to become servants. It only made him angrier when I tried to talk my way out of the

situation. He refused to listen to me, and before I knew it, I learned he had forcibly withdrawn me from the Magic Academy. When he finally calmed down, he commanded me to go on exchange at the school in the Empire of Ulster. And this time, I would study what he chose.”

“Oh, Rashida, I’m so sorry to hear that.”

Emma rubbed her friend’s back, trying to alleviate some of the heartbreak she saw on her friend’s face. She could hardly believe how haggard and exhausted her friend looked when normally she was so much more responsible, energetic, and hardworking than most.

Gleaning her friend’s unspoken question, Rashida continued. “Also...do you remember when I told you there was someone I wanted you to meet? Well, Father expelled him from the estate because of my defiance.”

“Him...?” Emma cocked her head, puzzled, by the mention of this “him.”

“Besides my exclusive maid, I also had an attendant who doubles as my bodyguard. He was the one who taught me all sorts of magic. But...Father blamed him for my wanting to be a lady’s maid, so he dismissed him.”

“That’s awful...”

“He... Eugene...is an outstanding, marvelous person, you know? So it was outrageous of Father to discharge him from his post.”

Tears spilled again from Rashida’s bloodshot eyes. Her anger overtook her briefly as she viciously pressed her clenched fists against her eyelids in an attempt to stop the tears. But her efforts were in vain.

“Father’s fury went so far... He wouldn’t even allow me to write any letters. I read your letter, Emma, but I’m so sorry I couldn’t reply. I so badly wanted you to meet Eugene, too.”

The Rashida Emma knew overflowed with confidence and dignity. Yet she detected no signs of either in the girl before her as her shoulders shook with sobs. Her pale face and gaunt cheeks made it clear how Rashida had spent her long summer holiday.

I wish I could use my power to help her. Emma startled herself with how

naturally the thought floated into her mind since a time traveler couldn't use their ability for their own ends. Until now, she had never once considered breaking the cardinal law drilled into her very body.

But then she remembered how Rashida had treated her so kindly from the beginning of their time at the Academy. Emma's time affinity had never bothered the other girl, either. It hadn't taken her long to comprehend that Rashida's generosity of spirit was a result of the strict circumstances governing her life as a duke's daughter.

I know I can't use my power selfishly... But I can't stand to see her like this either.

"All right... I'll handle this."

"Emma...? I don't...understand?"

Emma stood up, radiating determination. Rashida looked on, surprised by her friend's abrupt change in aura.

"Rashida. We'll meet again at school."

"But, Emma... I... I've already been..."

Emma didn't let her finish her sentence before she strode out of the room. She had let her emotions take control and rode their clamoring drive now. If she lost any bit of the intensity churning inside her, she knew she couldn't do what she was about to.

"Emma, what's tumbling through that head of yours?"

A forbidding, thunderous expression settled on Ian's face as he waited patiently by the door. Right now, her friend was acting in his capacity as the Stephenson heir, whose duty was to protect the time traveler. She wasn't surprised to see his suspicion of her. It was proof of how well he knew her, and he darn well should, considering their long years together.

But Emma ignored him. She stared at the back of her right hand and chanted the spell.

"Sigil, activate."



“**EMMA**, don’t you dare forget our promise for tomorrow. I’m so looking forward to introducing you to the person I want you to meet!”

“An army couldn’t stop me from coming to you because I’m excited too! I can’t wait to read all those books with you.”

The conversation was eerily familiar to the one Emma had once before. Starting today, the Magic Academy would go on summer recess. *Though technically speaking, this will be my second summer in this life. Third overall.*

Emma had used her power to return to the day before the long summer holiday started. Again, she repeated the day she promised Rashida she would visit her, then saw her friend off with a smile as the other girl boarded her family’s coach.

She said her attempts to deceive him about her choice of study enraged her father more than anything. So her situation should change if she and the duke have a chance to discuss things properly before the report card arrives.

“Well, Emma, I see you’ve made a close enough friend in Lady Rashida to call upon her during the summer holiday as well, hm?”

“Indeed. Tomorrow at ten in the morning.”

“Understood. I’ll be there to escort you.”

Looking at Ian’s cheerful smile and refreshing profile, Emma felt her conscience stabbing at her. She was now a criminal who had violated the most sacred law of time travel. Though Ian normally indulged her, she knew he wouldn’t forgive her if he ever found out. Just as Emma had committed her life when she willingly undertook the responsibility of a time traveler, so too had Ian Stephenson, son of a marquess and member of a long, storied bloodline, staked his own as her protector.

Returning to my fifteenth year when I was already in my nineteenth was a force majeure. But I can’t claim the same for this deliberate time leap... What other choice did I have, though? Leaving Rashida in that state was never an option.

The next instant, the young man Emma unwittingly found herself intrigued by appeared in her line of sight. She sensed a hint of disturbance in the

atmosphere. Still, she knew she needed to talk to him in private, so she spoke to Ian.

“Ian... I’m sorry, but I made other arrangements for my trip home today. I won’t be riding with you in the Stephenson carriage.”

“Oh, is that so? Then, I’ll wait with you until this other coach arrives.”

“Really, you don’t have to. I mean, we’re still on the school grounds? I don’t expect anything to occur here of all places.”

“Perhaps I’m being too overprotective. Right, then, I’ll take that as my cue to leave.”

Ian smiled ruefully at Emma as she stifled her giggles. He gave her a light bow before departing. Once he was out of sight, she turned her attention to the person on her mind, who was standing some distance away from them. His carriage had already arrived, but he showed no signs of stepping into it. She didn’t spy his usual companions either, which made the situation even more curious.

“Lord Glen. Why are you here?” she asked.

“Do I need a reason to be here when I attend this school as well? Will the world end by my being here?”

“I-I suppose you’re right. I beg your pardon for my impolite question then.”

Her first time on this same day in her second chance at life, Emma had unconsciously been looking for Glen. Ultimately, she left on the short journey home after not seeing hide nor hair of him. Naturally, she couldn’t tell him that, so she tried to be subtle with her inquiry about his presence. Clearly, she had failed. But his next words astonished her.

“That aside... Why did you turn back time two months? Was the summer recess not long enough for you?”

“Ghh!”

Thud. Emma unthinkingly dropped the bag she’d been holding. She vaguely heard the fountain pen and bejeweled metal bookmark her brothers had gifted her rolling onto the ground. At this time in her life, those two items were a few

of her most cherished possessions. She knew she should collect them immediately, but her body froze.

How... How does he know what I did? He shouldn't, regardless of his own affinity with time. She couldn't look away from him. Yet he ever so casually leaned down and picked up her fallen belongings.

"I... I should have done that. I'm sorry, and thank you."

"It's fine. For now, get in."

She followed Glen's gaze toward the Bering family's carriage.



I'M still not sure how things turned out like this... Seated inside the coach with Glen, Emma wracked her brain frantically. Overpowered by his intensity, she had helplessly conceded to his suggestion to take her home. And now she sat next to him.

"To start, why don't you tell me why you reversed time?" he asked. "It surely couldn't be because you *actually* wanted to enjoy summer vacation even more?"

"Of course not! What do you take me for?! I... I did it for Rashida."

Emma never intended for anyone to find out what she'd done, much less the reason for it, but she blurted out the truth without thought, caught up in Glen's relentless pace.

"Lady Rashida?"

"Yes. When the new term started, Rashida wasn't at school... Her father forced her to withdraw from the Academy."

To Emma's surprise, instead of interrogating her further on that note, Glen chose not to press and went in another direction entirely.

"And that's why you wanted to change the future? Tell me something, Miss Emma. Have you ever actually met Lady Rashida's father, Duke Eslan?"

"No, I have not."

"So...you thought everything would be resolved if you just turned back time?"

She gasped mentally because his words had brutally found their mark. To add insult to injury, his disdainful tone indicated what he thought of her reckless plan. Emma remained mute, unable to argue.

“Does Ian know what you did?”

“No... No, he doesn’t...”

“I thought as much. If Ian had accompanied you, you wouldn’t have returned to this day.”

A small part of Emma had wondered the same, so to have him pick at her concern only validated it. She clenched her skirt tightly between tense fingers.

“I... I haven’t told Ian about this time leap or about Rashida. You have to understand the state she was in. I couldn’t bear to see her shed another tear out of those swollen eyes... I don’t think she even ate that much the whole summer. It broke my heart, and I couldn’t just stand by doing nothing.”

“So you let your emotions carry you away.”

Glen braced an elbow against his armrest and rested his chin on his hand. For some time, he brooded in silence, staring out the window.

“With things the way they are... I’ll be joining you on your visit tomorrow.”

“Huh?”

“The thought of you handling the duke by yourself, with not a single concrete plan in your head, gives me chills. Ergo, it’s vital that I accompany you since I’m aware of the circumstances. This way, I can support you and lessen my own worries too.”

Emma’s eyes widened in shock at a response she could never have imagined. Yet she couldn’t deny the merit of having an ally aware of the situation. Frankly, she felt relieved.

“Then... I humbly accept your offer. Thank you very much.”

“Hm.”

She bowed her head deeply in gratitude, but his gaze didn’t stray from the view outside. He merely nodded his head in acknowledgment.

“May... May I ask you something?” she ventured.

“What is it?”

Glen finally turned to look at her as if nothing of note had just happened. His expression emanated his usual bone-deep confidence in himself, so much so that Emma wondered if his attitude would change when he heard her question. Which she found quite vexing.

“Um... How did you learn I reversed time? Since I’m the one who used the ability this time, you shouldn’t have realized that anything changed. Moreover, based on your behavior, I can’t help but think this is your second time repeating summer recess too.”

“Oh. Is that all? I guess I have no choice but to tell you. So be it. Because the time magic you possess now is one you received from me. Naturally, it’s still linked to me, which is how I knew.”

“...I’m sorry, *what?*”

Thud.

While Glen’s tone was exceedingly casual, the weight of his words was anything but. Emma’s bag again slipped from her grasp, and again she vaguely heard her beloved fountain pen and bookmark roll out, clanking on the carriage floor.



AROUND the same time, Emma went to Rashida’s house on the last day of the summer holiday and resolved to turn back time, Glen was in his room in the imperial palace of the Empire of Ulster.

“Glen. You’re certain you want to return to Reauxvil’s school of magic tomorrow?”

At his friend and classmate Hans’s question, he raised his head from the book he’d been reading.

“Yes, I am. Even if we go back today, there’s nothing to do anyway. We’ll use teleportation magic to travel to the royal capital, then take a carriage to the Academy.”

“Fine. You know, I still think their school rules are much too strict. Their ban on using teleportation magic is awfully rigid.”

“No point complaining about it at this stage, since Reauxvil is the nation that adheres most strictly to law and order amongst the four surrounding Ulster.”

Glen Ray Bering. Also known as Lester Ray Quinzato. He was a prince of the Empire of Ulster and fifth in line to the throne. Including the Monarchy of Reauxvil and the Olano Kingdom, there were two other countries that enclosed Ulster. Each of the four retained its own autonomy to a great extent, but the fact remained that they were subordinate to the suzerain state of Ulster, which wielded ultimate authority over them.

“Even though this is our first trip home in some time... You know, I find both Reauxvil and Olano much more hospitable and comfortable to live in.”

“I don’t disagree with you.”

Glen had a good reason for using the name and title he’d acquired in Olano as a cover story. It had to do with a complication plaguing Ulster’s line of succession, chiefly that he possessed an affinity for all the elements despite being the fifth prince. The Empire’s royal bloodline was a distinguished and superior one. Where royals and nobles in other states saw their potential peak at two or three magical attributes at most, an affinity for all four major elements was the norm in the Ulster imperial family.

Except Glen ended up being cursed with time magic as well. Knowing his mere existence might present a political threat to his much older brother, the crown prince, he left his motherland behind and lived abroad under an assumed name. By doing so, he intended to convey that he held no thoughts of rebelling against him. Since his own self-imposed exile, he had rarely returned to the Empire and now considered it little more than a strange, uncomfortable land.

“Ngh...!”

Just as Glen was about to shelve the book he’d been reading, a familiar sensation zapped through his body. The minute he recognized it, his eyelids grew heavy, and there was a ringing sound in his ears. In the darkness behind his closed eyelids, red digits flashed past. *This...is...Emma’s...doing...*



SOMETIME after experiencing the nostalgic sensation, Glen opened his eyes. Instead of his chambers at the imperial palace, he found himself back in his dormitory room at Reauxvil's Magic Academy. The oppressive heat and humidity pressing down on his skin made him turn his gaze to the calendar hanging on the wall. Looking at it, he realized today was the day before summer recess began.

"So...I went back two months, huh?"

He wasn't especially surprised. He had known the possibility of something like this occurring after he transferred his time magic to Emma, who also happened to possess her own affinity for the special element. *What happened? I know I returned to Ulster the day summer recess started... But it seems I may have to change my plans.*

Glen and Emma's first encounter occurred before time rewound for her, throwing her into a do-over. Emma didn't know, but they had met for the first time during her original timeline.



"ANNETTE... What on earth...happened here?"

They were in the reference materials room. Emma spoke to Annette, who stood stock still, on the verge of tears, amidst broken glass jars of chemicals and other magical resources.

"Emma...! The teacher told us we needed materials for tomorrow's practical lesson, so I tried to reach them since they were so high up. But I couldn't... So I thought, 'What if I used magic to bring them down?' but that didn't work either... Because I ended up destroying so much that now the rest of the class won't be able to use any either... What should I do... Ngh..."

She trailed off and started weeping. Emma had come to the reference room, worried about why Annette was taking so long to return after being sent on the errand by their teacher. It turned out that her concern hadn't been misplaced.

"I'm sure things will turn out just fine. There should be more supplies in the storehouse. I'll clean up here, so stop crying, won't you?"

“Emmmaaa! I’m sorry for always being so useless...”

She pulled out a handkerchief from one of the pockets lining the skirt of her dress uniform and handed it to Annette. A sight like this was nothing new for her. She shoed Annette to a corner of the materials room before snapping her fingers crisply. First, she carefully cleaned up the shattered pieces of the glass jars littering the floor. Next, utilizing the same life magic, she collected the magical materials that could still be salvaged and stored them back on the shelves.

“All we have to do now is replenish the unusable chemicals, powders, and other magical materials with stock from the storehouse.”

Emma nodded to herself, satisfied by the once-more pristine state of the reference room. From behind her, a voice intruded.

“What are you two doing?”

“Lord Bernard, hello.”

Emma curtsied lightly to him in greeting. Despite being her childhood friend and fiancé, at the Academy, he was the son of a higher-ranking noble house. Formalities needed to be observed at all times, and strictly.

“Emma was just helping me clean up! The teacher asked me to retrieve the materials we needed for tomorrow’s practical class, but I made a mess of things by botching my usage of life magic. Thank goodness Emma arrived when she did. I don’t know what I would have done without her.”

Bernard responded more to Annette’s innocent smile than her explanation. “Is that right? Then your errand is over? Because the rest of the class is gathered at the café in front of the dormitory. We’re all working on our assignments. Lady Frances and Lady Erina are also part of the group. I remembered you saying you wanted to become friends with them, Annette, so I thought this would be a good chance for you to join us. What do you say?”

“Truly?! But...”

Seeing the sparkle in Annette’s eyes dim just as quickly, Emma smiled cheerfully at her friend. “I can replace the supplies here from the storehouse. So go on and don’t worry about it, hm?”

Annette was the opposite of a dependable, grounded young lady. Soft. Dreamy. Flighty. All those words and more described her much, much more precisely than strong-willed or serious. She always stood out like a sore thumb among a crowd of well-bred, polished aristocratic daughters, which caused Emma to worry about her to no end.

“Emma... I don’t know how to thank you. Again, forgive me.”

“Annette, she said it’s fine, so enough groveling. We’re leaving now.”

“Have fun!”

Emma saw them off with a smile as they walked together back to the dormitory area. *Right, I need to borrow the storehouse’s magical key from the faculty office.* But she almost collapsed in shock at what she learned when she went to the teachers’ office.

“I beg your pardon...? The storehouse is currently empty...?”

“Correct. We moved the supplies from the storehouse into the reference materials room. The merchants won’t be coming again for another three days, I believe... Was the damage really so awful? Except there’s no possibility of you making such a colossal mistake... The perpetrator is Miss Annette, isn’t it?”

Emma smiled stiffly, uncomfortable with the sympathy in the teacher’s eyes. Everyone in school knew about the relationship between her and Annette. Childhood friends who lived next door to each other in their dormitory, where Emma ended up being Annette’s caretaker more often than not.

“There’s nothing left of the magical materials her class is supposed to use for their practical lesson tomorrow.”

“Well, that certainly is a problem, hm? Then please tell Miss Annette to go into town and buy the necessary supplies. She should be able to accomplish that much before the dormitory curfew.”

“I’ll go in her place instead.”

The image of Annette’s excitement and springy step at socializing with her classmates popped into Emma’s mind. It would be wrong of her to interfere when her friend finally had the opportunity to deepen her bonds with her

classmates.

“Are you sure...? Then will you help her, too? You’re skilled at magic, and you would make the perfect escort for Emma.”

You who...?

The teacher’s gaze went straight past Emma to someone behind her. When she turned around, she saw an unfamiliar young man with silver hair and light purple eyes. His very presence engendered a unique atmosphere. She realized that he wasn’t a citizen of the Monarchy of Reauxvil. *Oh... I know him. Well, I know of him. He’s the one all the girls were swooning and squealing over. His name... What was his name...*

“I’m Glen Ray Bering. Pleased to meet you. How can I assist?”

Grasping the situation instantly, he amiably introduced himself to Emma. Regardless of the fact that this was a direct request from a teacher, she dearly wanted to avoid being in the awkward position of venturing outside alone with another male student. Not only did she have a fiancé, but she also already had a protector in the form of Ian. So she politely tried to refuse, hell-bent on going herself.

“Thank you, but I...”

“Glen. I’d like you to accompany Miss Emma on her shopping trip and help her carry everything back. She knows a lot about Reauxvil’s capital. It’ll be a good learning opportunity for you as well.”

“Truly?! Excellent. Please do allow me to escort you, Miss Emma.”

“Then... I thank you in advance.”

She couldn’t bring herself to reject him when she saw the exchange student’s eyes light up in delight. Not long after that, the two boarded one of the school’s carriages and made their way into the city.

“Does the townscape in the Olano Kingdom look the same?” she asked.

“I’d say the convenience and architecture bear a strong resemblance... But the atmosphere is different here. I quite like the air of life permeating the Monarchy of Reauxvil.”

They chatted about harmless topics as they disembarked from the carriage and headed inside a shop specializing in magical resources. Emma couldn't help a thought from surfacing as she glanced covertly at Glen, smiling affably and performing his role as escort to perfection. *His aura...is very similar to Prince Victor's.*

Prince Victor was the royal family's second son, which made him someone a mere viscount's daughter like Emma couldn't treat carelessly or casually. But her and Ian's frequent trips to the royal palace on official time travel business had allowed them to build a friendship with the prince. *Lord Glen is most definitely the son of a high-ranking noble house as well.*

Just as the shopkeeper finished drawing up the invoice addressed to the Magic Academy for the goods purchased, something happened. *Is that child lost?* Emma was idly browsing the store's other wares behind Glen while he spoke to the shopkeeper when she spotted a small, crying child outside the shop.

She looked to be around three or four years old, quite young. Just as Emma was about to rush out and approach the little girl, a man wearing a black greatcoat drew near. *Oh... He must be her father.* She felt relieved but noticed the girl wouldn't stop sobbing even after the man spoke to her. If anything, she bawled harder, fear oozing from her tiny body. *What in the world...?*

The next moment, the man roughly grabbed the little girl's arm. Her face froze in terror. Drove of people passed them by on the street, yet no one noticed them. *He... He's trying to kidnap her!*

"Miss Emma! Where do you think you're..."

Emma raced out of the shop before Glen could finish his question. She sensed him turning around, but didn't have a minute to spare.

"Kindly release that child." She commanded the man who was about to abscond with the little girl.

"Whatever are you blathering about? This is my daughter."

"Then, can you tell me her name?"

The man stared at Emma in aggravation, unable to drag the little girl away by

force as he'd been intending.

"You... You're a comely lass, eh? I'll be taking you along then as well."

He wrapped his fingers around Emma's arm and jerked her forward. *Ngh!*

"Stop it! Let me go!"

He's so strong...! There must be something I can do with my water magic. In her head, Emma frantically went down the list of offensive magical spells she could use. She couldn't use the more difficult ones, which narrowed her options considerably. At best, she could conjure an orb of water to smash against him or create fog to obscure his vision.

Wait! Emma thought of one more thing she was capable of. She could freeze him in his tracks by hardening the area around his feet with ice. But the special magical words for the spell refused to exit her lips. She was horrified at how powerless she felt. Too late, she realized she should have earnestly considered the serious impact of offensive magic in the real world instead of focusing on it as a simple academic practice during lessons.

While Emma dawdled, struggling to overcome her own fear, the man savagely yanked on the sobbing little girl's hair.

"Ow! Owwwwie!"

Oh, no!

"How dare you! Unhand us this instant, or you'll regret it!"

The man faltered slightly, surprised by Emma's sudden change in attitude because, up until now, her weak resistance hadn't amounted to much.

"What are you doing?"

Emma, glad to have stalled the villain for a little longer, had been desperately figuring a way out when Glen stepped in between her and the man. He forced the scoundrel to release her and the little girl. The skin on her arm was red where he had gripped it, and the toddler's hair was a fright. Even so, Emma felt intensely relieved by Glen's presence.

She heard him whisper a spell, though nothing seemed to be happening. Anxious at the lack of results, Emma squeezed the little girl's hand in her own,

trying to silently reassure both of them.

“You’ll pay for this, you insolent whelp!”

The man in the black greatcoat charged at them, but the magic Glen cast finally activated. The would-be kidnapper hung mid-air in an absurd pose as if suspended by invisible strings. *This magic... It’s triggered by a time delay!*

Emma hurriedly scooped up the little girl when the villain rushed at them. Now, her eyes widened in surprise. In this world, she knew various complex techniques existed that combined spellcraft and one’s own magical affinities. In this case, the user needed to have an affinity with time in order to execute time-delayed magic. Not to mention the difficulty of the technique itself. It was a given that Emma couldn’t perform magic on that level.

The commotion finally attracted the attention of nearby sentinels. After they turned over both the criminal and the little girl to them, Emma bowed her head to Glen.

“Thank you very much for saving us. On occasion, I have a tendency to act rashly. I know I should fix this aspect of my personality, but...in any case, I sincerely apologize for embroiling you too this time.”

“It’s fine. I’m just glad no real harm came to you and the child.”

“Indeed. I hope she’ll be reunited with her parents soon.”

As they smiled at each other, Emma realized Glen carried two large, seemingly heavy bags.

“Please, let me help you.”

Glen paused, surprised. “Is it then customary in Reauxvil for ladies to carry things themselves?”

Though his tone was teasing, Emma answered him seriously.

“The teacher assigned this task to me, and I will fulfill my duty accordingly. Lord Glen, thank you once more for your assistance.”

But when she reached for a bag, he lifted it high, out of her reach.

“As I recall, you’re not the only one she asked for help. After all, she bid me

help and protect you, yes?”

“I... I’m in your debt, then.”

Emma prudently decided that hounding him wouldn’t be the wisest move. Instead, she bowed her head again in gratitude. Satisfied by her surrender, Glen spoke.

“Where did all that menace from earlier go, eh? Looking at you now, I feel like I imagined it.”

“Ack...! P-Please forget you ever witnessed such an unseemly display. Even my closest friend Annette isn’t aware of it.”

“Well, well, now I’m even more intrigued. Why do you hide it? I found that side of you quite entertaining.”

“It isn’t appropriate for a lady to *entertain* others in such a disgraceful manner.”

“Hm. Perhaps you have a point, societal mores considered... Shall we be on our way then?”

They boarded the carriage, and part of the ride was silent. But by no means was it an awkward one where two people struggled to choose a topic of conversation. Instead, anticipation charged the silence with the excitement of discovering a potential new friend with whom one might get along like a house on fire. At least that was how Emma felt. She wondered what Glen thought.

When Emma braced herself against the vigorous rocking of the coach, Glen cast a spell to stabilize its rhythm.

“Thank you very much. Truthfully, I can’t handle the swaying of a carriage very well. It’s so bad, I often get queasy whenever I’m in one.”

“Think nothing of it. I’d be happy to ease your difficulties any time with such simple magic.”

The gentleness in his voice relaxed Emma.

“Lord Glen... You have an affinity for the element of time, don’t you? The magic you used earlier can only be used by such individuals.”

“You’re correct. I thought... Well, the little girl was hysterical with fear. I thought she might calm down once she saw the criminal in such a silly position.”

“Pfft...”

Though Emma found his consideration at the time misdirected, she knew she shouldn’t laugh at his reasoning. But she couldn’t stop a stream of giggles from escaping.

“How unusual... You have such an expressive face, Miss Emma.” The confident, easygoing attitude Glen had until now broke as a hint of shyness crept into his eyes.

“The truth is, I possess a time affinity too,” she confessed.

“Oh, really? I heard such individuals are quite rare in Reauxvil, though.”

He remained still, his eyes probing Emma’s. The rays from the setting sun slanting through the carriage windows gilded his pale purple irises, making them even more beautiful.

“Indeed. The country provides me with many generous protections, including safeguarding my future by arranging my betrothal to a wonderful young man so I can live a full life even after my power stops working.”

“If memory serves, the Monarchy of Reauxvil has strict temporal regulations on time travelers, yes?”

“You are correct, but... Does that mean it’s not the same in your country, Lord Glen?”

“Well, I’m a special case, so I can’t speak for others... Hold on, though. If you have a fiancé, won’t this impromptu shopping trip cause trouble for you?”

He technically answered her question, but Emma realized he also skillfully sidestepped it. Which told her she shouldn’t inquire further, so she smiled at him.

“Not at all, as it was a request from a teacher. Although...it wouldn’t hurt to keep silent about it unless someone asks, hm? We can’t have any unsavory rumors tarnishing our reputations, Lord Glen.”

“Hm... You really are a fascinating young lady. Initially, I had you pegged as an

easy mark who would go above and beyond for her friend, whether or not she deserved it. But you surprised me with your energy earlier in town—very at odds for a lady. On top of that, you're perceptive as well."

"Those in Reauxvil whose magical affinity is time are forced into the company of adults from the moment their ability awakens. Naturally, we become adept at wearing a mask because that's what our circumstances unfortunately dictate."

Emma smiled mischievously. Over the years, she became skilled at deflecting serious conversations like this with a pat reply and a quick laugh. Others' inevitable sympathy for her plight always made her uncomfortable. Responding like this lulled them into thinking she didn't mind her fate, which allowed them to redirect their sympathy into relief, freeing her as well. Usually, her quips and facade ended such conversations quickly, and it should have been the same with this one.

"You know, I can relate powerfully to your words. But sometimes I wonder what my original face looks like after wearing the mask for so long."

Emma blinked in surprise, not expecting Glen to follow up with a remark that hit so close to home. It made her realize they were cut from the same cloth. She'd never experienced this sensation before.

"And yet... We have no choice but to soldier on, ever playing the acts we must in order to survive," she replied. "I plan on fulfilling my role to the end, even should my mask be cast off someday."

"Ah, I must say it makes me glum to hear you say so. I was mesmerized by the real you, so brave and defiant."

"My goodness, *please*, please forget you ever saw that."

Smiling at each other within the confines of the carriage, Emma and Glen arrived on the school grounds. They disembarked and headed toward the school building. Their path took them through the garden. Just as they walked past a secluded spot near the common area, Emma heard familiar voices.

"Lord Bernard, please. It would be such a scandal if someone discovered us here!"

“Don’t worry. Emma should be returning to the dormitory about now, after she finishes up in the storehouse.”

Lord Bernard? Emma...? At first, she assumed it was a random pair of lovers having a clandestine meeting. Once she heard her own name and her fiancé’s, Emma’s heartbeat sped up. In the shade of a tree, she spied two people nestled so closely together that they merged into a single silhouette. The westering sun made it difficult to discern their features, though their voices belonged to people she cared about. Ostensibly knew. *Wait... What’s the meaning of this?*

“Is something the matter?”

Glen peered in concern at Emma, who suddenly stopped in her tracks. She desperately wanted to act like nothing was wrong so he wouldn’t notice. Except her voice remained stubbornly frozen, refusing to cooperate. The rest of her felt wooden too.

“Annette.”

Emma’s fiancé said her closest friend’s name in a tone so deeply, softly, and intimately that it echoed inside her head. She idly tried to recall if he had ever addressed her like that. The thought was so far from normal that she might as well have been thinking about a stranger. Unable to bear it, Emma clapped her hands over her ears, shutting out their voices. Her action and the presence of the two enjoying their secret rendezvous combined to enlighten Glen on the situation.

“Right... Come this way for now.”

He placed his hand on her back and gently urged her to walk some distance away.

“Thank you...very...much.”

But the shock was so great that Emma could barely stutter her gratitude. *That was Lord Bernard and Annette just now, wasn’t it? This means they’re...* Her head spun. Though she understood what she had encountered, she couldn’t accept the truth.

“Miss Emma... I think it’s perfectly normal for you to be angry right now. Like you were earlier in town.”

Both Glen's words and tone of voice were reasonable. They pierced through the panic overwhelming her mind and returned her to a much-needed measure of calm. For some strange reason, Emma felt reassured.

"No, it's fine. I'll just feign ignorance."

"Why?"

Why, he asks... His matter-of-fact question threw her for a loop as she struggled to pull together the scraps of her tattered pride.

"We were originally just childhood friends. As I mentioned earlier in the carriage, the engagement was merely a reward from the country for my services as a time traveler. So...if Lord Bernard has found someone he truly loves, who am I to stand in his way?"

"Bah, you hide behind logic and pretty words. But let's suppose what you say is true. There is still no reason to justify or accept his lack of sincerity and fidelity to you."

Emma tilted her head at him thoughtfully. Though he had been calm and amicable until a moment ago, the passion now coloring his voice surprised her.

"Lord Glen. It is not unusual for a man to take a second wife or keep a mistress. All the more so for a betrothal arranged by our parents and the monarchy..."

"Frankly, that's the one thing about Reauxvil that baffles me. I truly, truly do not see the meaning in such a custom. In my country, we love and hold dear only one person until the day we die."

Oh! His words were so blunt, Emma gasped mentally. She almost mistook his passionate speech for a confession of love for *her*. As if such a thing would ever happen! While she battled her confusion, Glen continued.

"Then... Are you telling me you plan to marry him without ever confronting him about this?"

"I...won't deny my anger. Yet I have no other choice. My family worries excessively about my future once my time magic runs out. My marriage to him will put their minds at ease, once and for all. And that is enough for me."

“I’m not convinced. I neither accept nor approve of your decision.”

She would have thought he was personally involved because he was so incensed. Seeing him behave like that on her behalf satisfied her in a way she couldn’t describe. That was perhaps why she unintentionally spilled out the truth in her heart.

“I-I... When I was a child, I wanted to be a lady’s maid. The one who took care of me was smart, knowledgeable, strong, and so incredible that I was always in awe of her. I gave up on my dream when I learned of my time affinity... I’m not sure how to explain it, but ever since then, I’ve learned how to be happy within the confines granted to me. At least this is what my mindset is now.”

“In short, you’re saying there’s no other fate in store for you, so your only lot in life is to accept it without fuss?”

“I am. Besides, traveling to the past is forbidden. I’ve never once thought of doing so, but... Today, for the first time in my life, I *did*. I fantasized for just one day. One day back in time would be enough for me to avoid hearing them. But what’s done is done and can’t be undone. I can’t erase my memory either, hm?”

Emma smiled wryly. Yet Glen gazed enigmatically down at her.

“...Fine then. I understand.”

Something in his tone struck her as unnatural, so she returned his stare, trying to decipher his meaning. His face remained impassive, giving her no clues.

“Although...”

“Although?”

“Although I would very much like to dump a pitcher of water over Lord Bernard’s head, as I find myself extremely aggravated.”

Wanting to mend the oppressive atmosphere, she forced a laugh.

“Consider it done.”

“I’m joking! I’m joking.”

Glen started chanting a spell, dead set on doing her bidding. Emma rushed to

stop him in a panic. Once she calmed him down, they tacitly resumed their journey to the school building. Both pretended nothing of note had occurred. Back inside the reference materials room, they put away the magical goods they'd purchased.

"I enjoyed myself today. Thank you for showing me around the town. I can assure you I won't forget today," he said.

"Oh...? Well, I had fun too, Lord Glen. I only wish for your sake that it had been normal, where all we did was clean up and run an errand together. Dramatics aside, thank you from the bottom of my heart. I think we might be great friends, don't you?"

"Hm... Perhaps."

Glen smiled, his eyes narrowing in thought. Once again, his uniquely powerful aura shimmered in the air as those mysterious purple orbs glittered softly down at her. At that moment, she found him terribly attractive, especially after his fiery but logical speech.

I... I'm so glad it was him by my side when I discovered those two. The thought rose unbidden in her mind, though she couldn't deny it was true.

"I'll be taking my leave now, Lord Glen."

"Of course. Take care."



AFTER he and Emma went their separate ways, Glen turned his right hand over, and the symbol for infinity appeared. And just as Emma had wished, he turned back time one day. When the day happened again, his advanced preparations affirmed that Annette wouldn't make a mess of the reference room, which meant Emma didn't need to clean up or go to the faculty lounge. It turned out to be a perfectly normal, uneventful day. Since he had the opportunity, Glen also made sure a mysterious waterfall almost drowned Bernard before he could invite Annette to meet him after school.

Of course, that meant Emma and Glen didn't go on their shopping excursion. He went alone into town and rescued the little girl himself. The days, months, and years passed by, and they graduated from the Magic Academy, without

ever exchanging a single word.



LATER, when Glen learned of the canceled engagement, he regretted his actions because they led to even more pain for her. That was why he had his next thought. *I want her to live her life as she truly pleases. How long did it take for the truth to open her eyes? If my calculations are correct, approximately two years have passed since the day we went shopping.*

Glen knew he'd been the only one privileged to see that side of Emma during the day they spent together. She had looked so beautiful and dignified when she spoke of accepting her fate, dreadful though it had seemed to him. He thought she was truly majestic.

But this isn't something I can tell her without a by-your-leave. It would only confuse and hurt her again. I would have liked to avoid the debacle at the dinner party as well... Except it was necessary so she could understand that she isn't a doll to be arranged at others' whims.

The day before his second summer recess began, Glen ruminated over precious memories only he had.



EMMA picked up the fountain pen and bookmark, then resettled in her seat. At that precise moment, the carriage jolted, throwing her off balance. Just as she was about to disgrace herself with an unfortunate pratfall, Glen caught her shoulders and helped steady her.

"Tha..."

"I apologize."

Before she could finish thanking him, he apologized first, which left her at a loss for words. It must have been for touching her. While Emma fumbled for a response, Glen muttered something under his breath.

"Oh!"

Immediately, the rough rocking of the carriage stabilized. She realized he must have cast a spell to control the coach's movement.

“I believe this should allow us to converse without issue now?”

“I... Thank you.”

Emma couldn't handle a swaying carriage. Even though she had never mentioned this to him, Glen matter-of-factly took care of the problem. She admitted to herself that his action surprised her. *This is the first time I've met someone so considerate.*

When she lifted her head, her eyes met his. But she detected a note of sadness in them. He should have been staring at her, yet she sensed his mind was focused elsewhere, seeing something only he knew. Unable to say anything to dispel the strange sensation, Emma tilted her head curiously at him. To her greater befuddlement, Glen laughed.

“Would you care to explain the joke?” she asked.

“It's nothing. I was just thinking of someone who also appreciated this magic.”

“I...see.”

Compared to his gentle chuckle, his response was unexpectedly brusque. It made her restless when she considered that the softness in his laugh had been for the person on his mind. Then she mentally scolded herself for her wayward emotions and firmly resolved to shelve the topic.

“Right... Back to our discussion,” he began. “You wanted to know why I went back in time, too, even though you were the one who initiated this reversal, yes?”

“That's right. Um... You mentioned a ‘link’ to my ability...and you bestowed your power on me... What does all this mean?”

“Hm, right. Well, to start, you went back in time on the night of the dinner party, yes? The fact is, I did, too. That evening, I cast a time-delayed spell on you, one that would transfer my power of time to you.”

What in the world...? His amethyst eyes captured her, refusing to let go. There wasn't a hint of mischief in his tone or attitude.

“Is... Is such a thing possible? Then, Lord Glen, you're the reason why I traveled back in time to my first year at the Academy?”

“Correct. Advanced magic can be accomplished when two time travelers’ abilities are combined. And... The you I know obeys laws stringently, not to mention your logical mind. That meant you wouldn’t use my power even if I granted it to you, so I bypassed your will and forced the time leap on you.”

The you I know? What does he mean? Emma nibbled on her lower lip as she considered the significance of those words. The more he talked, the more questions her mind produced.

“Wait... You said you gave me your time magic. So you can’t use it anymore yourself? Why would you do such a thing?!” she shouted.

“Because you touched my heart.”

“I have no idea what you mean by that. I don’t understand any of this...”

Try as she might, she could *not* figure out what she had done or said to him to warrant his actions. Though they had been at the Academy together for her last year in her original life, they had never spoken. The first time she’d met him was at the royal function in her honor. So when could she possibly have touched his heart? *He’s not referring to my disparagement of Bernard that night...is he? No, highly unlikely.*

“Miss Emma... Would you like to know then?”

Before she could even say, “Of course,” Glen went on.

“Frankly, I should be asking myself the same question. Because I don’t understand much whenever I involve myself with you.”

Having said his piece, he rested one of his arms on the window frame and cupped his chin in his hand. Emma couldn’t see his expression, since he was turned away from her. But she knew this much—his usual, unwaveringly relaxed poker face, one she thought she’d never see undone, had crumbled.

She understood that there was a profound meaning to Glen’s conferring his time magic on her. In the Monarchy of Reauxvil, her power alone was enough for the country to secure her future, even after her ability disappeared and her work ended. Again, the gravity of his action hit her. While she remained speechless, Glen spoke, still gazing out the window.

“In any case, I’ve been contemplating broaching the subject with you for some time, so...it might as well be now. Your time magic is limited in substance and number of uses, yes? In contrast, mine has neither of those restrictions.”

“But...how is that possible...? Reauxvil has never...”

Before she could finish her sentence, Emma cut herself off with a gasp as she remembered something important. *No, that’s not true. There is a special case in time travel history. I learned about it a few years ago.* Since her time ability awakened at nine, Emma’s education had focused tremendously on time travel while she worked for the monarchy. She recalled a piece of information.

Direct descendants of the Empire of Ulster’s royal bloodline possessing an affinity for time have no constraints on their ability or the frequency with which it can be utilized.

At the same time this tidbit floated into her mind, so too did the memory of him restraining Reauxvil’s second prince, Victor, just by raising his hand. Then there was the fact that the attribute determination form had turned black in class. *He introduced himself as an exchange student from the Olano Kingdom... But that’s obviously a disguise. Which means...I should address him as...Prince Lester?*

“May... May I continue calling you Lord Glen as I have thus far?”

“Just Glen is fine, actually.”

Her question subtly probed to verify his real name and title, but his unexpected reply had her fumbling for words. If he insisted on avoiding the question, the direct method would be better.

“Then... Glen. You’re a member of Ulster’s imperial family, aren’t you?”

“It isn’t as if I was actively hiding the fact. I just find that particular title unnecessary in my life, is all.”

“A while ago...you mentioned you had turned back time for your own ends... Were you referring to this?”

“Yes. Including our current reality, I would say I’ve reversed time twice... No, thrice, I believe.”

“That many?!”

Those were the only two words she could squeak, stunned by his revelation. Glen, unfazed, kept talking.

“A normal person with an affinity for time can’t change the past. No matter how hard they tried to do so, the power of history would correct the timeline. But my magic is different. I have the power to change history. I just never had a need to use it.”

Emma mulled it over in silence. The night she called off her engagement, she remembered her childhood dream of wanting to become a maid. She had wished from the depths of her heart to return to the time before she enrolled in the Magic Academy. But now didn’t feel like the right time to thank Glen, so she said nothing.

She couldn’t deny that this was exactly the development she had wanted in her life. Glen thought much too highly of her character because if her own power had still remained that night, she would have used it without hesitation to go back in time. His compulsory magic wouldn’t have been necessary at all, in her opinion.

Despite it all, one major question remained. Glen had yet to disclose his intentions behind transferring his power to her. She was ecstatic about the renewed opportunity to carve out her future, yet she sensed he wasn’t telling her everything, so uncertainty plagued her.

“The truth is...I *am* quite grateful to you,” she said. “But I’m also confused because there’s no reason for you to go this far for me.”

“Does one need a reason to help another?”

“Well, no, except your power is one-of-a-kind incredible. That’s not something to give to others so easily.” Emma dug in her heels, wanting an answer since she remained unconvinced.

So Glen replied, his voice low, “You turned back time for a dear friend... Lady Rashida, did you not? Is my act so very different?”

His simple yet sound argument ended her dogged persistence. Despite her desire to refute it, she couldn’t formulate the necessary thoughts. Except

Rashida was so special to her because she'd never had a friend like her before. So she found it hard to believe he could discuss his reasoning and hers in the same breath.

Especially when I consider everything else he's said thus far. It almost makes me think he sees me in a certain light... Uncomfortable with the thought that sprang to mind, Emma chose not to finish it and changed the topic.

"Even though you did so much for me... Don't you think you're being a bit too unyielding with me, Glen?"

"Really? If anything, I thought I was being *too* soft on you."

"Hardly, good sir. Seems we'll just have to agree to disagree, won't we?"

Glen smiled broadly at Emma's flat denial. "You only believe so because Ian spoils you silly."

"Well... I certainly won't deny that!"

"Speaking of the Stephensons... They're a family specializing in protecting and attending to time travelers, yes? In the not-so-distant future, a day will come when you and your protector Ian will have to go your separate ways."

An image of Annette floated into Emma's mind. *The future... Ian will be assigned to Annette, won't he?*

"Honestly...that night, I regretted not pursuing my dream to be a maid. So I will thank you for this second chance. I didn't focus on my academics as much as I could have the first time at the Academy."

"Really? You could have fooled me."

"I may be terrible at wind magic, but I'll have you know I'm doing my very best."

"Oh, I apologize. I didn't mean to come off as glib."

Glen smiled again as Emma huffed angrily, cheeks puffing out. She scrutinized his expression, realizing his smile was genuine. She cocked her head curiously at him, puzzled by the lack of sarcasm or teasing.

Still...I have a feeling he learned about my dream much earlier than he's

letting on. I sensed as much the day he taught me to use elementary wind magic as if he were instructing me with the express purpose of helping me achieve my ultimate goal...

“What troubles you?”

Glen returned her unfocused, unblinking stare with his own intent one. The overt gentleness in his eyes made her shy, so she reflexively broke her gaze from his and looked down. They spent the rest of the carriage ride in silence. It should have been her first experience alone with him in one, but Emma couldn't escape the nostalgic feeling that it wasn't.



THE next day, Ian arrived to escort Emma, and off they went to Duke Eslan's abode.

“...And so this is my second summer recess in this life.”

“I had no idea...”

Inside the carriage, she confessed to him how she'd turned back time to the beginning of the summer holiday to help Rashida. Since Glen pointed out her recklessness yesterday, she'd been reflecting on her actions and decided that revealing everything to Ian was important. Not just for her conscience but for their relationship as well.

Glen did say he has the power to change history. And I... Well, even though I understood that on a certain level, I used the ability without serious thought. To mitigate any more mistakes on my part, I need as many people who can look out for me as possible.

“I truly am so sorry for violating the cardinal law of time travel.”

As Emma bowed her head, her attitude humble and repentant, Ian exhaled heavily.

“I've been with you for a long time now, Emma, and it's the first time you've ever done something like this. That tells me a terrible fate must have befallen Lady Rashida for you to even consider breaking the rules.”

“I accept any and all punishment. I won't stop you from notifying His Majesty,

either.”

“No, I don’t think I will. Based on what Glen told you, the power you currently possess is a special one that only the Ulster imperial family has, yes? From my perspective, it isn’t something that the Monarchy of Reauxvil or the Stephenson family should interfere with.”

“Ian...”

Not only was he willing to turn a blind eye to her rash behavior, but he intended to help her as well.

“I’ll do what I can to support you today.”

“Thank you. Oh, one more thing. Glen... I mean, Lord Glen mentioned that he would be joining us, too.”

“I see... I’m not particularly surprised, to be honest.” He gazed pointedly at her, and Emma’s cheeks warmed.

“Ian, I... Whatever you’re implying, I-I think you’re mistaken.”

“Am I, though? At the very least, I don’t think I’m wrong about my thoughts on Glen’s feelings and motivation. Clearly, you have your suspicions, too.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“In any case, Glen is taking all this seriously, isn’t he? I *am* surprised by his level of commitment to you.”

Ian’s absent-minded murmur practically sent Emma up in flames, from the crown of her head down to the tips of her toes. The next instant, the carriage arrived at the Eslan ducal residence.



“YOU must be Lady Emma. Lady Rashida has been expecting you.”

“Thank you very much for having us today.”

“Emma!”

The maid led them to a salon they hadn’t seen the last time they had come here. Rashida awaited them inside. When they stepped through, Emma’s eyes widened, seeing Glen there, seated next to her on a resplendent sofa.

“Rashida! But wait... Glen, why are you already here?”

“You extended an invitation to him, didn’t you, Emma? Except you gave him a time that was much too early, you silly goose. Thanks to your oversight, though, we’ve been having a splendid time chatting about all manner of topics!”

Rashida beamed cheerfully, her smile loaded with hidden meaning. Feeling a tinge of suspicion, Emma focused her attention on Glen, silently demanding an answer. Yet he only feigned ignorance.

“Well... I did indeed invite him. I apologize for doing so without consulting you, Rashida!”

“Oh, pish-posh! None of that! Let’s have our own private chat in my room later, hm?”

She ended her request with a mischievous giggle. Emma realized her friend was in an uncharacteristically exuberant mood. For the most part, she could guess where the other girl’s imagination had wandered. That made her wonder what Glen had told her because, clearly, he had come here early on purpose.

“Lady Rashida, shall I serve the tea then?”

“Please, Eugene. Thank you!”

From deeper inside the parlor, a young man with strawberry blonde hair appeared, pushing a tea trolley. He appeared older than Rashida, perhaps around twenty years of age or so. He wore no tie with his white shirt, which looked comfortable and easy to move in. Emma realized this was the attendant-cum-bodyguard Rashida had gushed about.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Emma Grace Seagrove.”

“I bid you welcome, my lady. I’m Eugene. His Grace employed me as Lady Rashida’s personal attendant.”

Emma found his smile refreshing. This time, it was her turn to feel excited. She was finally connecting a name and face to the special person her friend wanted to introduce to her. Rashida blinked pointedly, exaggeratedly, at her several times, looking pleased with herself.

Ah-ha. So this is the person she holds a tendre for. By virtue of her inherent

position, a duke's daughter inevitably has to deal with unique circumstances. But if there's anything I can do to alleviate her burden, then I shall.

Glen and Ian greeted Eugene politely before they moved to the large window facing the garden. They were already deep in conversation about something or other. Evidently, they had zero interest in Emma and Rashida's girl talk.

Blast. There goes my plan to have a briefing session with Glen before we arrived. I guess I'll have to do this without a strategy.

It took Eugene only a few minutes to pour everyone tea. Once he finished, they all returned to their respective seats.

"What might this be?"

"Lord Glen graciously brought it with him."

A sheaf of documents Emma had never seen before rested on the table, along with the teacups and tea snacks. Upon closer inspection, they detailed the enrollment process for a school in the Empire of Ulster.

"I thought this information might prove useful. This school specializes in training ladies' maids and servants of the highest caliber. For those children of nobles who have already completed their higher education, they can graduate in a year if they're accepted. The school only admits a select few students every year, but once they graduate, they can work in any of the four vassal states. And, of course, Ulster's imperial place is also an option for employment."

Oh my! I would love to get my hands on this material, too! The thought popped into her mind unbidden as Glen spoke. She didn't even realize one of her hands had unconsciously reached out for the documents until Glen, seated diagonally across from her next to Rashida, cleared his throat pointedly. Emma gasped in surprise, immediately pulling her hand back. She couldn't help noticing his exasperated expression either.

Right, of course, this isn't about me... You dolt, get a hold of yourself.

"Oh! Father's home!"

Commotion could be heard from the foyer. The mansion's owner had returned.

“When I told him my friends would be visiting today, he said he would enjoy meeting them. He kept his word, too, finishing his business quickly so he could come home and greet you all.”

Rashida happily exited the salon. Watching her walk away, Emma found it hard to reconcile this bubbly version of her friend with her devastated, sobbing figure. All because her father had denied her not only any excursions outside but visitors as well.

“Hm... The Eslan family is...different from what I pictured,” Emma whispered.

“I have to agree with your assessment,” Ian responded. “Although... I *am* aware that Lord Eslan despises dishonesty and corruption. So I find it hard to believe he would deny Lady Rashida without giving her a fair hearing.”

Then why did he react so poorly the first time? Emma realized the answer to her own question not long after.

“...And there ya have it, laddies and lass! My little girl was a right menace to her dear old father. Right, then, younguns. Regale me with stories of Rashida at school. I’m hankering to know everything about the apple of my eye. I sincerely hope she isn’t a spoiled chit who relies on everyone over much, eh?”

“Father, will you stop it!”

Her father had barged into their teatime, then entertained them with a string of stories from Rashida’s childhood. The duke’s attitude remained jovial as he boomed with laughter. As he posed that question to the rest of them, Rashida scolded him, pouting.

“Lady Rashida’s grades are excellent, and she has many friends, too. She’s an example to us all.”

“Wonderful, wonderful. Relieves my heart to hear it.”

When Glen saw Rashida’s father narrow his eyes thoughtfully at Emma’s polite reply, he exchanged a glance with Ian and gave the other boy a slight nod. Understanding Glen’s signal, Ian directed the duke’s attention to the documents on the table.

“Speaking of your daughter, sir, we brought some papers she requested.

Though it hasn't been long since she started at the Magic Academy, she wanted to think about her future after graduation."

"These materials... Rashida, does this mean you were serious when you told me some time ago that you wished to become a lady's maid?"

His words echoed sentiments Emma heard recently during her own family's meeting about her dream. She couldn't help feeling bemused by the duke's reaction, which eerily resembled her father's. The man in question couldn't hide his surprise over the documents. He flipped through the pages in a flash. Emma thought it astounding that he could comprehend every bit of information so rapidly, considering it should have been his first encounter with the papers.

"So...you intentionally sent away for these documents from another country..."

Unexpectedly, Duke Eslan wasn't angry so much as thoughtful. His gaze didn't stray from the materials. After a few beats of silence, he spoke slowly, carefully.

"Rashida. Our bloodline always needs to consider its position first and foremost. I have instilled in you the importance of considering our family's status before declaring your intentions on any matter, yes? That includes the topic of whichever profession you aim for."

"Yes... Yes, you have, Father."

Though his words seemed strict and admonishing, his voice was gentle.

"There are two things in this world I cannot forgive—deception and lies. With that said, I can say I understand your earnestness about your choice of work. Is there anything else you'd like to discuss?"

Rashida cast her eyes downward, deep in thought for a few minutes. When she finally came to some sort of internal resolution, she lifted her head and spoke. "Father... I enrolled in the Magic Academy to master magic that would be useful to me in the role of a lady's maid. The major I chose at school is also to further my goal."

Her father remained silent, so she continued.

"After I graduate from Reaxuvil's Magic Academy, I want to attend this

vocational school in Ulster! It might not be an acceptable path for a ducal family, but... I swear I won't cause trouble for you or our family's honor. And when the time comes, I'll marry whomever you select for me. So won't you please grant me your permission to go after graduation?"

"Hm. I'm not sure I want to."

His response came without a hint of hesitation, and Emma watched Rashida's shoulders slump in defeat. But the duke wasn't finished. His next words revived a ray of hope in her friend.

"I know of this institution in Ulster as well. And I know that those who graduate from it are in great demand by other countries' royal families. I can bear with your attending the Academy for a few years...but I don't think I can allow my beloved daughter to leave me for parts unknown in a faraway nation entirely."

"F-Father..."

Rashida's voice was thin, wavering. Duke Eslan's eyes were gentle as he gazed lovingly at her, his expression one of an understanding father. *Now I understand...* He had always known about her dream. He had even prepared the perfect path for her to take so she could accomplish it. Emma realized he had been able to peruse the documents so quickly because he was already familiar with them. His surprise was about Rashida approaching him about this matter. All this time, he'd patiently waited for her to do just that. Instead, Rashida had tried to lie and talk her way out the first time, which was why he had been so infuriated then.

"Eugene."

Rashida's attendant snapped to attention at His Grace's call.

"Yes, Your Grace."

"For a long time now, you've been teaching Rashida many things in secret, haven't you?"

"I...have, Your Grace... Please forgive m—" His face pale but stoic, Eugene offered an apology, but Rashida's father cut him off.

“Will you teach her more during the summer holiday? I won’t allow her to attend this school in Ulster, so I’ll need to compensate for her education in another way.”

“Yes! Yes, of course, Your Grace! It would be my pleasure.”

Still radiating a touch of nerves, Eugene nevertheless bowed deeply in acknowledgment. Rashida’s father stood up, satisfied that his instructions would be carried out.

“Now then, the rest of you. You’ll dine with us tonight before you return to your respective homes. I’ll have my people notify your families accordingly.”

“Thank you very much, Father.” Rashida watched her father walk away from the parlor. Tears welled in her eyes, and happiness gave her cheeks a rosy glow. “Father... He accepted my dream!”

“I’m over the moon for you, Rashida!” Emma exclaimed.

“Except...he did say he won’t let me attend this particular vocational school. That just means I’ll have to work harder to convince him.”

“Well... That’s certainly one way to look at it...”

Emma blinked as Rashida’s face puckered up in discontent. Persuading her father to let her attend this school would provide a new source of fuel for her friend’s fiery determination. Even so, this outcome was much, much preferable to Rashida being forcibly withdrawn from the Academy because of her failed attempts to deceive the duke about her dream to become a lady’s maid.

Rashida discussed her dream with her father without fear, and Eugene wasn’t dismissed from his post... All in all, things went exceedingly well. Emma sighed deeply in relief at having overcome this hurdle. Rashida then spoke to her friend.

“Emma! What do you say we talk, just the two of us, in my room until it’s time for dinner?”

“Of course!”

“Then would you mind terribly if Glen and I borrowed your garden for a bit?” Ian asked.

“Um...not at all... But why...?”

Emma and Rashida tilted their heads curiously at Ian’s unexpected request. Having received her consent, Ian twined his fingers, stretched his arms overhead, and limbered up. While conducting his light warm-up, he extended an invitation to Glen.

“Let’s borrow wooden swords and have ourselves a bout, Glen.”

“Hm... Why not? I could do with a bit of sport.”

Ian, what are you up to...? Heir of the Stephenson clan, her friend and protector, was raised using the principles of a special education for gifted children. Emma was well aware he had mastered swordsmanship as part of his learning. But this was the first time she’d seen her friend challenge someone of his own volition in such a manner, for his own mysterious purpose.



“**BOYS** are...so strange, aren’t they?”

Rashida murmured while staring down at Ian and Glen through the window of her third-floor bedroom. The two had been going at it for some time, engaging in so many matches that the girls had stopped counting. Eugene stood nearby, keeping a close eye on them and most likely keeping count of their victories and losses.

“How many matches does this make now? I really hope they don’t tire themselves so much that they fall asleep before dinner.”

“I remember one of my older brothers mentioning that when men cross swords, they learn a great deal about each other. Even so... They seem to be taking these bouts quite seriously, hm?”

“I wonder, I wonder.”

Emma tried to keep her response as neutral as possible, but for some strange reason, Rashida ended her comment with a devilish giggle.

“Emma, who are you rooting for?”

What sort of question is that! Emma blushed unconsciously.

“Wh-Who am I... Neither! Besides, you’re well aware that Ian has undergone special training as a time traveler’s protector. He won’t be bested so easily.”

“Hmmm... You sound as if you’re speaking from Lord Glen’s perspective.”

“Uh... Am I?”

“I think you are. It’s easy to tell he cares about you, Emma, from the way he looks at you.”

“Wait... Truly? Do you truly think so?”

Emma had worried herself silly over the thought since yesterday, so she couldn’t help blurting out such a remark. At the same time, she recalled learning about Glen’s gift to her when they’d been in the carriage. *Maybe I was right. He wasn’t just helping someone in need. There may be a deeper meaning to his incomprehensible actions. I really, honestly hope that’s true.* When her wish unconsciously flashed through her mind, she shook her head in panic.

“I... I’m engaged to Lord Bernard.”

“Oh, yes, the boy who comes across as arrogant.”

“He, in fact, is arrogant, actually.”

I’m losing my mind. I had no reason to say such a thing. Emma hurried to pull herself together.

“If I can successfully break off my engagement to Bernard...only then will I consider th-this particular suitor. In the meantime, though, I plan on shutting such thoughts away.”

She couldn’t recall ever falling in love with someone before. From fairy tales and novels she’d read over the years, she logically understood the sentiment. But she had never experienced it. That was why she couldn’t grasp this strange sense of superiority she felt about a certain someone’s possible affection for her. It made her restless inside.

I used to think...that I felt love for Bernard... But now I realize... Whatever I felt for him barely counted as normal compassion. In her first life, Emma devoted herself to Bernard. Though she could admit it in hindsight, even that had just been one part of the ladylike, obedient facade she had maintained.

“You’re right... Life is complicated, isn’t it?”

In the blink of an eye, Rashida’s expression turned serious and pensive as she gazed down at Eugene in the garden. Anyone looking at her would know she was in love with her personal attendant. Emma realized Duke Eslan was aware of his daughter’s affection for the young man and was biding his time, waiting for the right moment to separate them.

That’s what he must have been insinuating when he asked Rashida if there was anything else she wanted to tell him. Born into a lower noble house like I was, even I can’t choose my spouse... So Rashida must be harboring much greater pain than I. Realizing her friend remained unaware of the upcoming conflict in her future, Emma’s chest tightened even more, seeing the sadness in her friend’s eyes.



“**MY**...face...feels...so...hot...”

During dinner, Emma politely excused herself. To the best of her ability, she walked out of the Eslan dining room and onto the attached terrace to cool herself off. Alone.

Everything was so delicious...and the meat stew looked particularly tempting, so I asked for a heaping portion...but how could I have known that was wine sauce and not fruit sauce?

Emma couldn’t handle her liquor. In her homeland of Reauxvil, once a citizen was old enough to enter the Magic Academy, they were also old enough to consume spirits. But she fundamentally lacked the constitution for alcohol, to the point she had gotten tipsy from the minute traces of wine in the dish she’d just had.

“I thought the Marquess was only bragging as a doting father would, but he was on the mark about you, Ian. You have grown into a splendid young man since I last saw you a bit over a year ago. And to think you would be in the same class as my darling Rashida!”

“Thank you very much, Your Grace...”

From behind her, Emma heard the others enjoying their conversations with

their meals in the dining room. *Goodness, to think I'm frittering away the duke's generous offer to join them for dinner like this... How much more pathetic can I get? I want to at least recover enough for dessert!*

The wine dulled her senses enough for her facade to waver as her real self bubbled to the surface. Even her thoughts were a mixture of politeness and unhingedness. She fanned her face frantically, trying vainly to cool down faster.

"Are you all right?"

Suddenly, Emma sensed the other half of the terrace's ottoman dip under someone's weight. *Ack.* The second she thought as much, a cold glass filled with water pressed against her cheek.

"Cold! It's so cold! Th-Thank you, Glen."

"Duke Eslan seemed in no hurry to release Ian from his company, so I figured I could help you in his stead."

If only he had phrased his words a wee bit differently. She was disappointed to hear his logic. While idly thinking, she turned to look at Ian, trapped in the dining room by their host. Sensing her gaze on him, Ian gave her a slight nod, silently encouraging her to engage with Glen. When she saw that, Emma realized Glen's words weren't as unfeeling as she'd assumed.

"Earlier..." she began.

"Yes?"

"Earlier...in the garden, when you crossed swords with Ian."

"Oh, were you watching us?"

Glen raised his glass to his lips. The tiny bubbles churning in the liquid reflected the light streaming through the window behind them, creating fantastical sparkles. His action was so practiced and elegant that Emma realized she wasn't the only one who was nineteen on the inside.

"You know how Ian is always refreshingly calm and gentle?" she continued. "Well, today was the first time he challenged someone to a bout. Outdoors no less. Imagine my surprise to see him doing so after all the years I've known him."

“Hm, I can understand why you would feel uneasy. Tell me this, then, Emma... Which one of us were you watching?”

Badump. Glen’s question jolted her. His deliberate pause and tone of voice indicated he asked light-heartedly. But when she responded, her voice came out much more shrill than she intended.

“I watched... *Eugene*. Yes, that’s right, Eugene.”

“Ah-ha. Can’t say I’m all that surprised considering...the complications for him and Lady Rashida.”

Emma fashioned her answer out of desperation, yet she still felt vexed by his nonchalant reaction. She conceded defeat and admitted he was better at this game than she would ever be.

“Emma. Have you sobered up?” Ian had finally freed himself from the duke’s conversational clutches. He made his way to them on the terrace ottoman.

“Not yet, but I think I should be fine soon enough.”

In reality, she still felt airy, like she would float away, but staying out here wasn’t an option for a number of reasons. The biggest one being right next to her. Spurred on by the potential dangers to her heart and ego, Emma moved to stand up smartly. Except her sense of equilibrium was on the fritz, so she tumbled instead.

“Mpf!”

Glen caught her just in time and kept her upright. The way his arms supported her shoulder so gently and carefully sent a delicious frisson of excitement through her whole body.

“You know... I think this one’s more inebriated than she’s letting on.”

Still holding her, his breath ruffled her hair when he spoke. She usually only got a vague, distant hint of his cologne, but now his unique scent was much stronger. Her face heated, and her breathing grew raspier. The alcohol. The alcohol was to blame. *Yes, that’s right—the alcohol.* She frantically tried to convince herself.

Keen eyes observing her, Ian spoke. “Glen. Would you do me the favor of

escorting Emma home? I know I ought to... But I'd like to speak to Duke Eslan some more."

"Ian," Glen said. "I don't think that's a great idea... Besides, as you said, it is *your* job."

Emma sensed unspoken undercurrents in their strange conversation. But drowning in embarrassment and half drunk, she lacked the brain power and energy to analyze it. Instead, she flared up angrily at them.

"So... You're both trying to foist me off on the other because neither of you wants to take me home? Do I have the gist of it?"

"Yes, you do."

"Blast!!!"

She had never heard Ian speak so casually and bluntly before. The muffled shriek expressed her surprise because she couldn't think of anything else to say.

"...I jest. I jest."

"I-Ian, why you..."

"Let's just say that there may still be things left unsaid. Besides... You saw Glen's skill with a sword earlier in the garden, didn't you? Since he's capable of protecting you, I'm confident in his abilities to escort you home."

"I see... You're right."

Ian's words finally made Emma realize why they jousting in the garden.



"**THIS** is the second time you're escorting me home, literally the day after the first, no less... Thank you very much."

Once they settled who would take Emma home, Glen took her hand and led her to his coach. Inside, she bowed her head respectfully and thanked him for his kindness. She wouldn't have been able to stand not doing so.

"It's fine. I'm just acting as Ian's replacement today."

"I... I've always taken it for granted that Ian would do whatever he could for me. Even in the future."

“Hm.”

“Of course, I can only speak up until four years from now, but... I need to set my eyes on the future to have any hope of becoming an independent person. I can't always be bothering those around me, especially the ones I care about.”

This was her way of agreeing with and understanding Ian's insistence on Glen taking her home. She felt like he had given her a glimpse into his always kind heart with his implicit encouragement to cut the apron strings tying her to him.

“I think you're misunderstanding his intentions. Actually, I'm positive you are.”

“You don't have to cheer me up...”

Emma's gaze was distant as she mired herself in her own thoughts. The air around her quivered. Thinking Glen had huffed a laugh, she turned to look at him seated next to her but found he had closed his eyes. The moonlight illuminated his eyelashes, casting long shadows on his cheeks. Looking at his profile like this, she thought he was truly magnificent.

The carriage didn't rock. She had been worried about riding in it in her drunken state when motion sickness usually assailed her sober. The journey was surprisingly smooth, even pleasant.

“...Are you feeling all right?”

She thought he had fallen asleep. Though his eyes remained closed, Emma hurriedly turned her gaze away from his form when she heard his question. She didn't want him to sense her scrutiny of him.

“Yes, I'm fine now. I'm still amazed that this carriage has such an even rhythm.”

“Would you like to know my secret someday?”

The ambiguity in his answer gave her pause. Deciding it would be best not to delve deeper into it in her current condition, she instead thought of it as confirmation of him having cast some sort of magic to control the coach's rhythm. When she wondered if he had learned this level of consideration because of the person she'd sensed him thinking of yesterday, she felt herself

on the brink of depression.

The next instant, she remembered what Ian had mumbled on the ride to Duke Eslan's residence: *"In any case... Glen is taking all this seriously, isn't he? I am surprised by his level of commitment to you."* Trying to banish her friend's words and the ensuing reaction they engendered in her, Emma vigorously shook her head from side to side.

"Glen... In contrast to your appearance, you're quite solicitous of others, aren't you? You should consider showing that side of yourself to other young ladies. Your fan club might lose some of its members if you do, granting you the peace and quiet you likely seek."

"Bah. What a waste of time and energy. I only do what I deem necessary."

"I beg your pardon?"

She tried to make conversation to hide her embarrassment, but nerves and tension tinged his voice when he responded. It startled her to hear it. Wanting to know what his expression looked like, Emma turned to gaze at him but found his face already turned away toward the window.

"You know... It takes great effort to maintain a carriage that doesn't rock?" The hint of roguishness in his voice, combined with his blunt words, confused her enough that she wasn't sure what to do.

"Then... I thank you."

"Hm. You can sleep if you want. I'll wake you when we arrive."

Though he had been calm and collected until a few moments ago, she sensed his shyness oozing out after her foray into conversation struck a chord. She blushed in response.

As the scenery passing by through the window became more and more familiar, Emma realized it wouldn't be long before they reached Seagrove Manor. *If only it had been farther away.* Whether it was because of the alcohol or Glen, Emma felt weightless, like she was drifting. For some strange reason, she never wanted the sensation to disappear. When she thought about it ending, she wanted to cry.





EMMA welcomed the new term for the second time in her second life. Like the other students, she arrived at school on the first day directly from her home.

“Emma, it’s been too long! How are you?!”

“Rashida! Thank you so much for inviting me over the summer. I had so much fun!”

“I wanted you to visit a few times after, but... My parents decided to go on holiday to a faraway place, so I couldn’t. Forgive me, won’t you?”

Rashida didn’t sound energetic. Emma cocked her head, puzzled by her friend’s attitude.

“Rashida... Did something happen over summer recess?”

“Yes, actually. Eugene was suddenly summoned back home.”

“What...?”

Caught off guard, Emma couldn’t think of anything else to say. *But why... We should have changed the future.* Seeing her friend frozen, Rashida drummed up a bright smile and tried to alleviate her concern.

“It’s fine. I’ll be fine. He’s been betrothed for some time, and I knew it long ago. But his intended’s family had a sudden change in their circumstances, so the marriage is happening earlier than expected. They need an heir, you see. Which is why he resigned from his post.”

“Rashida...”

“In any case, I still enjoyed summer vacation a great deal. The day you all visited me, I finally felt like I had gotten through to my father about how serious I was about my dream to become a lady’s maid. All of the documents from the special vocational school in Ulster also gave me the push I needed to continue on my chosen path. I feel like I’ve cut myself free of many shackles. So, Emma... Thank you for coming to see me.”

Rashida smiled at her, but Emma couldn’t find the right words. *Does this*

mean that...Eugene's separation from Rashida had nothing to do with her dream in the first place? It was always bound to happen because of external factors?

The hustle and bustle in the lecture hall sounded faint to Emma. All she could see was Rashida's expression as she stared single-mindedly at Eugene while he watched Glen and Ian sparring.

"Emma. I trust you are no longer intoxicated?"

"Of course not."

Submerged in her sentimental memory, Emma returned to reality as Glen's words broke her self-imposed trance. Rashida looked at each of them in turn, then smiled meaningfully. She gave him a shallow curtsy before leaving them behind.

"Rashida..."

Though she acted cheerful, the fact that she wasn't responding to Emma's call conveyed her desire to be left alone. Yet Rashida's spine never wavered as she walked away. Her friend kept her head high, no matter the circumstance. To Emma, her departing figure looked radiant and heartbreaking.

Second Year at the Magic Academy: Ideals

DESPITE holding on to a measure of bewilderment at having returned to the spring of her fifteenth year, Emma enjoyed the second round of her first year at the Magic Academy. The year flew by in a blur, and she was now in her second year. Unlike all the foundational classes that made up the first-year curriculum, the second year at the Academy was when students would take classes geared toward their future professional goals. For example, they would learn applied life magic in earnest this year with practical lessons to enhance their education.

“I...think I might not do so well in applied life magic,” Emma said. “Still, I’ll do my best!”

“Anyone can use life magic, but controlling it gets more difficult as you learn how to use elemental magic. I don’t have an affinity with so many attributes like you, Emma, but I understand how you feel.”

“Oh, wow, Rashida, you’re struggling with the class, too? Are you having trouble with the magical language portion like I am?”

Emma thumped her textbook down on her desk and sighed gustily. The two were hard at work, absorbing the information noted in their textbook for their afternoon advanced life magic practical lesson. Today, they would focus on how to use life magic to reheat and maintain the right temperature of tea that had cooled.

Life magic was a convenient magic anyone in this world could use with a flick of a finger. However, applied life magic was another beast entirely. Just like elemental magic, it required spellcraft that employed magical language. Due to this, one’s elemental affinities often interfered with the execution of applied life magic, resulting in poor results for the user.

Though she hadn’t disclosed the fact to the school at large about her affinities with all the elements, her unique disposition made using applied life magic all the more difficult.

Glen taught me last year that what's important isn't the spell but the image one has in their mind... The trick works with elemental magic, but not so much with applied life magic. I need to practice more.

"Wait, Rashida, I just realized something. No lady's maid would ever serve reheated tea. Don't you think doing so would disqualify one from even *being* a maid? Isn't it the norm to brew a new pot instead for the young lady to enjoy?"

"I agree wholeheartedly with you, Emma. Eugene never, ever did something so base..."

"Sunny was the same."

In their seats at the front of the wide lecture hall, the two complained for the sake of complaining. Then the door opened with a rattle. Professor Katie entered the room along with one other individual. The class erupted in excitement upon seeing the stranger who accompanied their teacher.

"Hello, everyone. It's nice to meet you. My name is Morris Pat Winwood, and I'm here as part of my training at the Department of Magic. Starting today, I'll instruct the second-years, for two weeks, in practical lessons of applied life magic. I look forward to getting to know you."

He had dark brown hair and sky-blue eyes covered by black-rimmed glasses. He could have passed for a third-year student were it not for his formal dress shirt, necktie, and slacks.

"Listen up, everyone. Professor Morris is an alumnus who graduated from the Academy three years ago. Right now, he's studying at the Department of Magic to become an accredited teacher at this school. He was outstanding at his practical lessons during his time here, so make sure you learn all the tips and tricks you can from him!"

Professor Katie's introduction riled up the class even more. Most students taking this applied life magic class were girls, and Professor Morris's symmetrical, clean-cut features pierced right through their hearts. Despite his short tenure here, their excitement at having him on the grounds was palpable.

"Hm... Don't you think Lord Glen is more manly?"

"G-Go ask someone else, please."

Emma's face twitched in response to Rashida's smirk and sly question.

"Friendly reminder that today's practical lesson will focus on reheating black tea magically, without using a teapot warmer. Those with an affinity for fire must be extra vigilant! Make sure you have proper control of your magic before you deploy it!"

Professor Katie's warning reminded Emma of the disaster she'd nearly created on the day her affinities were determined. *Oh, right... I burned my fringe in front of her, didn't I?* At the Academy, Emma's "official" magics were water, wind, and time. The only ones who knew the truth were Professor Katie, Ian, and Glen. *When she's telling fire-magic users to be careful... She means me as well, doesn't she? I wonder if the level of control I use with water and wind magic will be enough.*

She wanted to ask Professor Katie for advice since she knew of Emma's circumstances, but her teacher was busy helping another student. A line had already formed at the head of the class by the lectern. Emma predicted it would be some time before her turn came. *Then why don't I try it first and see how it goes?*

Based on what she had read in the textbook, though this spell stimulated the fire element, at its core it was a life magic that didn't harm people. As long as she utilized the correct tools and spells, there shouldn't be any problems. Taking a deep, calming breath, she read aloud the magical language written in the textbook.

"Tea once cold, warm again to your mistress's liking."

At that moment, Professor Katie gave them another reminder, her voice echoing throughout the lecture hall. "Personality affects this particular magic, so make sure you're in a calm state of mind!"

"Huh?"

By the time Emma heard her, it was too late. She had only wanted to warm the contents of the transparent glass teapot in front of her. Instead, the liquid boiled violently as the temperature exceeded what she intended. Except it didn't stop there. The water evaporated, turning into steam. Just when she thought the pot would shatter, a large hand appeared, covering the teapot. A

hissing sound came from the teapot as the heat shaking it violently dissipated. When she looked closely, a section of it had been frozen.

“Are you all right?”

“Y-Yes, I am. Thank you very much, Professor Morris.”

He had stopped the pot from exploding. His next words were frosty.

“You. Do you have an affinity for fire?”

“No, I don’t. I can just be too frank and impulsive sometimes.”

The more elemental affinities a person possessed, the harder it became to control magic. In a desperate attempt to make sure no one other than Professor Katie knew of her omni-affinity, Emma gave him a plausible-sounding excuse. But he wasn’t fooled.

“A frank and impulsive personality? So, even knowing that about yourself, you still intend to study applied life magic?”

The words expelled from Professor Morris’s well-defined lips stabbed through Emma. She remained mute, unable to form any reply to his sudden attack. He added another remark to his excoriation for good measure.

“Then we should all be grateful you don’t possess an affinity for fire.” Though his tone was measured and polite, his sky-blue eyes glittered coldly behind his glasses.

“Um... Are fire users really so incompatible with applied life magic?” she asked.

“It isn’t their fire affinity so much as their rash personalities that create the issue. The fact that you’re enrolled in this class tells me you’re aiming to be a lady’s maid. Do you know what the most important thing is for any maid who works in this country?”

“...Devoting herself wholeheartedly to the care and protection of the lady to whom she is assigned.”

“Correct. It means always prioritizing your mistress over yourself. So do you think there’s any need for a maid who could hurt her charge by the simple act of reheating tea?”

His argument was extremely logical. He only spoke the truth. But Emma's heart grew heavy like it was suddenly weighed down by lead.



“DON’T you think it’s quiet today?” Glen asked.

“Hm. It’s always like this, though,” Emma said curtly.

They were in the cafeteria for lunchtime. Glen, accompanied by Ian, approached Emma and Rashida. But Emma was in no mood for social niceties, so her response was lackluster. Next to her, Rashida smiled ruefully.

“I apologize for her behavior, Lord Glen. Emma experienced quite a shock earlier in our lesson. I think she should be back in good form in no time.”

“No, no, Rashida, good form isn’t good enough anymore. I’ll have to try harder to be a paragon of ladylike grace. Yes, yes, now and forever,” Emma said quietly. Instead of being scared off by her prickly and listless attitude, Glen sat across from her. Then she saw the corners of his amethyst eyes crinkle as he grinned at her.

“You know... I think I can pretty much guess what transpired.”

“Same,” Ian replied. “Must have been the practical class for applied life magic.”

Once they became second-years, Glen and Ian were assigned to different classes since Emma and Rashida were on the academic track to fulfill their goals as lady’s maids. But whenever their schedules aligned, the four would get together during lunch, chatting the time away.

When Emma thought about her time at the Magic Academy in her original life, she had been glued to Ian’s side. In comparison, her life now was incredibly fulfilling... And yet, she couldn’t work up the energy to snap angrily at their smug, all-knowing looks.

“Professor Morris from the department of magic made it *excruciatingly* clear that as I am now, I can never be a lady’s maid,” Emma told them. “So long as I can’t put my future mistress first, I’m leagues from being an impeccable maid. Which is why I’ll focus on the trappings required by the role. That is a perfectly

modest, ladylike persona. Shouldn't be too difficult, considering I played the part for so long anyway."

"Well... I understand your frustration," Glen said. "If you possess multiple elemental affinities, controlling magic is significantly harder in a normal state of mind, but it gets exponentially more difficult when one's emotions are in disarray."

"Wait, Glen, you too? Can you give me an example of a time when you struggled? How did you deal with it?"

Of the four of them, Glen was the most accomplished by far, always achieving top marks and excellent results in his classes. It wasn't public knowledge, but his outstanding capability marked him as a member of Ulster's imperial family. Without hesitation, Emma sunk her teeth into the fact that even he had occasions where he couldn't manipulate magic well.

Except he ignored her questions to ask her one of his own.

"Emma, is your ideal maid only capable of using magic?"

"No, of course not. But..."

"Actually, never mind. Don't worry about it for now." Glen stood up. "Would you like to undergo special training after classes are over for the day?"

"Special training...?"

Emma blinked at the unexpected invitation. She sensed Rashida, next to her, and Ian, seated diagonally across from her, exchanging meaningful glances and smiles.



*"**TEA** once cold, warm again to your mistress's liking."*

Crack. The teapot in front of her shattered.

"Argh! Not again!"

Exhausted, Emma threw herself down on top of the desk in the training room. Next to her was a cookie wrapped in charming packaging.

"Don't be afraid of failure," Glen said. "Even so... We can't have you continue

breaking pots. We'll run out eventually. We do face a conundrum, eh?"

"Exactly my concern..."

Instead of objecting to Glen's teasing, she agreed with him. She had nothing else to add that hadn't already been said. Her eyes strayed longingly toward the cookie on the desk.

A week had passed since Glen's declaration in the cafeteria to begin Emma's special magical training. Every day, they conducted this intensive practice session to improve her magical control. For whatever reason, he always prepared snacks for her each time as a reward. It annoyed her to be treated like a child, but what annoyed her more was that she enjoyed their time together.

In the meantime, Glen munched idly on his cookie.

"Tell me something... Why is your reward of choice always a cookie?" she asked.

"I ate them often when I was young, especially during magical practice. Think of this cookie as a connection to your memories with your beloved maid."

"Hmmm."

Emma didn't quite grasp what he meant, so she helped herself to the bag of cookies on her desk instead. She pulled open the wrapper and shoveled one into her mouth. The sweet taste of vanilla spread across her tongue. Its simple flavor didn't match Glen's fairytale beauty and aura. But she didn't mind the gap between the treat and the boy who liked it. Her hand reached into the bag to retrieve another cookie.

My memories with Sunny, huh? Emma's memories of her time with Sunny weren't limited to the attack by the magic fox. For example, her struggles as a child with her studies in geography. When Sunny observed her charge having difficulty remembering the characteristics of each region, her maid ordered specialty goods from each locale. She tailored each day's teatime to a specific area until Emma mastered the information.

Then there was another occasion etched deep into her mind. A day when her long-awaited outing with her mother fell through. Sunny did her best to accompany her in her mother's place. To Emma's surprise, she canceled all the

reservations at the shops and restaurants Emma and her mother were supposed to visit that day, taking her to different places instead. Sunny explained to the disappointed Emma that she had done so in anticipation of the next time she and her mother would spend the day together. Bolstered by the thought, Emma regained some enthusiasm as she realized there would be another day for her and her mother to enjoy together.

Oh, now that I think about it, Sunny didn't use magic on either of those occasions. I never noticed it until now because I was so dazzled by how amazing she was. All I could think was that ladies' maids are truly wonderful.

She chewed on the last of the cookies in the bag as she reflected on memories of her idol, then swallowed the final morsel. *I feel like I understand how to do this now.* Emma straightened in her chair, shaking away the gloom that had settled over her because of her successive failures.

"Hm... Professor Katie told us Professor Morris would be grading us on our tea-warming magic. The exam is taking place a week from today, the same day he's set to return to the Department of Magic. So I have to master this spell by then, whatever it takes."

The grades a student earned at the Magic Academy tremendously influenced their career paths after graduation. Most lady's maids who worked at the royal palace or for duchies were outstanding pupils during their time at the school. Strong evaluations of practical lessons were vital in expanding a maid's employment options.

"Professor Morris is the one training to be a teacher, right?" Glen asked.

"Indeed. Professor Katie mentioned what an excellent student he'd been here."

"Professor Katie might have given you some leeway since she's aware you have an omni-affinity, but I doubt you'll fool Professor Morris," Glen pointed out. "And it's not like you can reveal your magical attributes to a member of the Department of Magic either."

"I really have no desire to work for the country longer than I have to. Moreover, there'd be no purpose in receiving consideration for my exam. It wouldn't help me in the long run anyway."

The issue wasn't that she couldn't complete her assignment, making her unable to earn good grades. It was more basic. What hindered her was applied life magic's incompatibility with her omni-affinity and inherent personality. Because of it, she couldn't control her magical energy well, and therein lay her problem. If she didn't overcome this obstacle, then Emma couldn't become the ideal maid she was aiming to be.

Her bag of cookies now empty save for a few crumbs, Emma fetched another pot and chanted the spell once more.

"Tea once cold, warm again to your mistress's liking."

Steam rose from the clear glass pot. This attempt was already going better than all her previous ones. But when she thought about having to curb her magical energy at the right moment, she wasn't surprised to see the black tea begin to bubble violently. *The pot's going to break again if it gets any hotter.*

"Emma, you should stop soon," Glen warned.

"Just a little more... I don't want you to interfere unless I ask."

She heard an exasperated sigh in response to her sharp command. Glen's suggestion indicated it was only a matter of time before he had to utilize his own magic to intervene. His reaction was natural, considering Emma couldn't control her magical energy very well. Except she found his attitude aggravating, so she refused to look away from the pot.

The lid rattled. *Just...a little more... I can keep this up a bit longer...*

She imagined a sunny afternoon, perfect for a young lady to sip tea leisurely. Steam gently wafted up from her unidentified mistress's teacup. Next to it, a teapot rested calmly, the tea at the exact right temperature instead of scorching hot.

Scorching hot? Oh, blast it. The minute she thought about it, she heard a harsh crackling sound, and the lid flew off the pot. She closed her eyes.

"Ngh!"

Pieces of the broken lid should have flown right at her face. But she didn't feel any impact. *What...happened...?*

When she opened the eyes she'd squeezed shut in reflex, she saw blood dripping down Glen's arm. He had reacted instantly to protect her. Shards of glass pierced his flesh, stuck. *Oh, my goodness!*

"I-I'm so sorry! We have to get you to the infirmary right away!"

"No, it's not that bad. I'll be fine."

"No arguments! Let's go!"



EMMA grabbed Glen's other hand and dragged him to the infirmary, flying there in a panic. But nobody was inside. So many bottles of medicine lined the walls that it seemed out of place within the entity known as the Magic Academy. And a majority of it was oral medicine. The medical practitioner in charge of the infirmary would concoct a specific medicinal formula based on the student's malady.

Special conjurers were only assigned to the school during events like mock tournaments. These witches and wizards used healing magic on such occasions. Otherwise, this infirmary operated much the same as a normal hospital because wounds required extraordinary magic to heal.

"It should be right around here."

Without her noticing, Glen had taken the shards of glass out of his arm and reached for a bottle on one of the medicine shelves. His right hand hung limply by his side, blood still oozing. Emma's face paled at the sight.

"Darn it! The injured should sit down posthaste," she ordered. "I'll tend to you."

To her surprise, Glen obediently sat in one of the chairs. She quickly found medicinal herbs that would stop the bleeding, a salve, and a dressing. She was used to this kind of thing because she had been Annette's de facto caretaker since the other girl would often hurt herself out of clumsiness. *Which reminds me...* When a particular incident came to mind, Emma tried asking him about it.

"Our first year... You fixed my burned hair, didn't you? Does that mean you can heal wounds, too?"

“So you didn’t forget. Well, I used special magic back then. I don’t use it on just anyone, you see.”

Emma pressed a clean, soft square of fabric onto the back of his hand to stop the bleeding. Though she succeeded in controlling the trembling of her hands, she nevertheless felt heat rising in her cheeks. Glen’s tone had been extremely matter-of-fact.

Then what does it mean that you used it on me? Despite the thought, she couldn’t string together a reply because of his incredibly gentle tone combined with his straightforward words. She was smart enough not to pursue this.

“Aside from the lid flying off there at the end, your last attempt was going pretty well,” he said.

“I thought so, too. But as long as I keep relying on your counsel at pivotal moments, I’ll never succeed. Because it means I can’t make calm, rational judgments on my own yet.”

“Well, well... I think you’re finally understanding the trick to it.”

Emma heard the smile in his voice, but she refused to look up at his face as she tended to him. She carefully removed the cloth and applied the salve to his skin, holding his hand gently in one of hers. His hand was cool, the same temperature as hers. Once she finished that step, she moved on to the next, wrapping the dressing around his arm. The sibilant sound of the fabric rustling against itself as she wound it around and around reverberated in the quiet infirmary.

“You know... There’s one thing I’ve been wondering all this time... How in the world did I even end up with an affinity for all the elements?” Emma asked.

“I wracked my brain on that for a long time as well... Does a member of the Ulster imperial family appear anywhere in your bloodline? If one does, then heredity would be a logical conclusion,” he said.

“Not a single trace. If I had, wouldn’t you know?”

“Not necessarily. Unlike Reauxvil and Olano, the Empire of Ulster has an incredibly long history, much longer than either of these vassal states. That’s why many people can trace their lineages back to the royal line. Moreover, to

maintain the superiority of the bloodline, it's not unusual for relatives to marry each other. For example, my mother. She's a descendant of a younger prince in the royal family, albeit one from five generations ago."

"I see..."

It seemed that when Glen married, it would be to a young lady from a family with blood ties to the Ulster royal family. Though she harbored this faint suspicion for some time, pain still lanced through the depths of her heart. The dressing felt heavier now than it had a moment ago. Yet she silently continued her ministrations.

"The special magic I mentioned reacts to blood," Glen explained. "I wouldn't be surprised to learn if it activates upon encountering someone with hereditary ties to the Ulster royal family."

"And I'm telling you that's not possible," she snapped. "Because I was born *here* in Reauxvil, as the daughter of Viscount Seagrove."

Emma hadn't looked up once the whole time, and she finished wrapping the bandage around his hand.



ONE week later, on the day of Professor Morris's exam.

"Emma, here."

Lunchtime was over, and she was on her way to the training room for applied life magic. Glen gave her a small tin.

"What is this?"

Head tilted curiously, she twisted open the lid covering the lemon-colored tin. Inside, the container was packed to the brim with the cookies Glen had been treating her to during their two-week-long intensive training. Full of dry fruits and nuts, the cookies gave off a tempting vanilla aroma.

"Think of these cookies as a good luck charm. Though it might serve as merely a mental balm, I suggest you take a few bites before your exam."

"Thank you. They look delicious!" she exclaimed.

In the end, she hadn't succeeded once at the tea-warming magic. The only silver lining about the whole endeavor was that she had stopped failing so spectacularly. Even so, she remained nervous. It would be a challenge, if not impossible, to obtain Professor Morris's approval as she was. *I feel even more pathetic when I think about the fact that Glen can use all his magics so skillfully...*

"Perhaps you're under the impression that I've always been good at using my abilities?"

"Huh?!" Emma froze at the unexpected question. Was he a mind reader, after all? "I...I'm not?"

"Well, let's say you were," he said with a wink. "I'd tell you you're wrong. The only reason I know about and can use magic is because of my efforts. As long as you try your best, your efforts won't go to waste."

My efforts won't go to waste. On the surface, Glen seemed effortlessly capable, but he had just given her a glimpse into himself with his words. When she factored in his special instructions to her after school these past two weeks, the experience added even greater weight to his words. *I want to know more about him and all the burdens he's shouldered so far in his life.*



"NEXT, Miss Emma Grace Seagrove."

"Yes, sir."

At Professor Morris's summons, Emma hurriedly but stealthily stuffed two cookies into her mouth. She chewed them as fast as she could before swallowing. The same cookies she'd been snacking on the whole time she trained with Glen. The ones he'd given her earlier. If she viewed this exam the same as her practice sessions with him, she felt markedly calmer and reassured.

In today's exam, each student would be called up to the front to demonstrate their attempt at tea-warming magic. So far, of the students who'd been tested, only half had passed. Rashida, who had already had her turn—and what a wildly successful turn it was—raised her fist encouragingly at Emma.

"Good luck, Emma."

Emma nodded at her friend, then stood up and walked to the lectern at the head of the hall. Professor Morris spoke to her, his tone impassive.

“Ah, it’s you. Do you need a shield?”

“No, I don’t.”

A shield was a magical device designed to protect the examinee in case hot water erupted or the pot exploded. Normally, they didn’t use it in the applied life magic class, but Professor Morris had prepared one for Emma anyway. Except she would prove to him and herself that it was unnecessary.

“Tea once cold, warm again to your mistress’s liking.”

The black tea within the transparent glass teapot swirled fluidly. A second later, steam rose inside. This was usually the point when Emma would run into trouble. She couldn’t cut off the flow of her magical energy properly, so the tea would get hotter and hotter until disaster struck.

I have to stop it now. She pulled back the hand she held over the pot and exhaled slowly, deeply. The tea within continued bubbling. About now, the lid would usually fly off from the pressure of the accumulated steam, but she sensed that wouldn’t happen this time. *I think I’ll finally succeed today.*



Emma's gaze remained focused on the pot, and soon after, the bubbling inside the pot subsided. *It should be fine now.* She heard Professor Morris's voice on the heels of that thought.

"Right, then. Your test is over."

"Professor...?"

"You must have practiced a lot, eh? It shows because your personality didn't have a disastrous effect this time. A job well done, Miss Emma."

Eeep! The usually cool Professor Morris sounded surprised and impressed, his sky-blue eyes wide in satisfaction. She passed the exam.

"Thank you very much."

"But you must keep in mind your personality. It will continue to pose a challenge with other magics. I believe the more you train, the more easily you'll be able to adapt. Even so... Even so, you'll need to exert a great deal of effort into every advanced magic you try your hand at—more than the average person, in my opinion. As you did now."

"Yes, sir! I learned to manage this much after many attempts, so I'm confident my hard work will pay off in other magics, too."

She couldn't decipher Professor Morris's expression as he stared at her beaming face, but Emma wasn't bothered. A powerful sense of accomplishment exhilarated her. *In hindsight, I'm glad Professor Morris taught us along with Professor Katie. If it had been her alone, I have a feeling she wouldn't have tested me so rigorously since she knows my situation.*

Once class ended, Emma raced out of the hall, wanting to thank Glen for all his help. She found him in his classroom and eagerly told him the good news.

"Glen, I passed! Profess Morris even said I did well!"

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Thank you again so much. It's all because you taught me so much in our training lessons."

At her words, he broke eye contact, smiling shyly. *I've never seen him like this*

before. Emma's heart raced upon witnessing the unexpectedly boyish expression on his usually confident, relaxed face.

Second Year at the Magic Academy: Festival

ONCE a year, the Magic Academy held a festival. Normally, the school prohibited anyone except staff, faculty, and students from being on the grounds. Not to mention the large degree of autonomy the educational institution was allowed by the federal government. But the festival day was the only time the Academy opened its doors to the public. Naturally, the general citizenry arrived in droves to enjoy the myriad offerings.

“Hmm... I wonder if I can manage tomorrow. I’m a bit worried, to be honest.”

In her dormitory room, Emma’s heart pounded with nervousness and excitement as she stared at the mountain of hair ornaments she’d made by hand.

“You practiced so much. You’ll be fine, I promise!”

Though she nodded emphatically, Rashida looked uneasy as she held a comb. This festival represented a stage for students to display mastery of their studies. Last year, all they had to do was wander around and appreciate their upperclassmen’s stalls and exhibits because first-years didn’t participate. But now that they were second-year students, it was different. Accordingly, Emma and Rashida decided to open a hairstyling salon with a few of their friends.

The magic required to change hair color and styles was difficult, even among the many that fell under the life magic umbrella. Which explained why lady’s maids skilled in such magic were in high demand. Nobles visited the school’s festival with their families, so it wasn’t out of the realm of possibility for aristocrats to speak to any students who excelled at the art. So Emma and her other friends, aiming to become lady’s maids, saw their salon as a grand opportunity.

As usual, Emma labored extensively when it came to magical control, much more than others. Unlike her attempts at reheating tea, there was no physical danger to others. But if she lost focus for even a second, someone’s hair could

wind up an extreme color or style.

“You’ve improved a lot since you first started practicing. And when you *have* succeeded with your hair arrangements, you’ve done it better than anyone else!”

“That would be all well and good were it not for my success rate barely reaching twenty percent...”

Emma couldn’t help sulking. As she had noted, she only succeeded at magical hair dyeing two out of ten times. In her estimation, such a low number automatically disqualified her from working with any guests who visited the Academy for the festival.

“Emma, haste makes waste and all that, so calm down,” Rashida advised. “You can worry about employment opportunities next year. That means you still have a year’s worth of time to get this down pat.”

“You’re right... You’re absolutely right. Then this year, I’ll focus on doing my best by supporting everyone else.”

She remembered Rashida’s failed attempt on the first day of school to change her hair black, instead winding up with a strangely glittering gray color. But a blunder like that was impossible for her friend now. Emma returned her friend’s smile with a weak one of her own. Yet inside, she couldn’t help thinking she was the only one still lagging behind everyone else. She sighed softly, plagued by morose thoughts.



“WOULD you be able to style my hair like the picture in this hair catalog?”

The long-awaited school festival was in full swing. A young girl plopped herself down in the chair in front of Emma, her face serene and composed as she made her request. Emma couldn’t take her eyes off her.

She had long silver hair and light amethyst eyes. Though she was still quite young, her speech was refined and articulate. More than that, though, her facial features were already perfect, hinting at the great beauty she would eventually grow into. *And she looks exactly like a certain someone I know...*

Upon closer inspection, Emma realized the adorable, girlish design of her young client's dress couldn't conceal the fact that the fabric and trimmings were of superbly fine quality. *You know... If someone told me she was one of Glen's relatives, I wouldn't be surprised...* Frankly, it gave her the strange feeling that she was looking at a much younger version of Glen.

With a gasp, she brought her mind back to the task at hand. When she checked the hairstyle the little girl wanted, she breathed a sigh of relief. Emma could arrange this particular coiffure without magic.

"Understood, my lady."

The hair salon Emma and Rashida opened with their school friends was a roaring success. Customers came one after another. They hadn't even had a chance to take a break. This charming, lovely, aristocratic little miss was Emma's tenth customer of the day.

"Do you think I'd look pretty with pink mixed into my hair?" the girl asked.

"Let me see. Your hair is a beautiful silver color, my lady. If we mix in some pink, I imagine you would look like a fairy."

"Then would you do it? You can, right? Since this is a magic school!"

Emma's hands froze as she stared at the little girl's innocent smile. "Um... In that case, would you mind waiting for one of my colleagues to take over? Unfortunately, I can't dye hair just yet, so I'll inquire with one of my skilled maid friends instead."

"Oh, really?" The little girl blinked her big, pale purple eyes and tilted her head in consideration. "You know... You can't be afraid of failure."

"Ummm, my lady?"

Emma stared at her in astonishment because the dignified voice didn't match her youth. Not to mention how familiar those words sounded.

"My older brother always says that," the girl continued. "'Every one of your failures will eventually lead to success.' That's why I'm always trying and failing at lots of things!"

"What a wonderful mindset. I happen to agree with you and your brother, my

lady. But I can't risk ruining your lovely hair, either. If I did, I wouldn't be able to sleep tonight out of sheer sadness. Please *do* let me try it on you after I practice more, though."

"Hm... You're a very cautious young lady, aren't you? Not a bad way to be."

"I'm honored to have you compliment me so, my lady."

Emma smiled at the little girl before arranging her hair just like in the catalog. First, she created a side braid, then gathered it along with the rest of her silver locks into an elegant bun at the back of her head. The only thing left to do for Emma was the finishing touch—a flower as decoration.

"Hm, hm, hm. You don't have a lot of confidence in your magic, but your fingers are nevertheless talented," the girl praised her.

"Thank you, my lady. It must be all the practice I've had today with hairstyles that don't require magic."

"Hard work is never a bad thing, so I like people like you."

Emma chuckled ruefully at more mature words that didn't match the little girl at all. "I'm happy to hear you say so. Today, being the Magic Academy's yearly festival and all, many visitors have arrived, excited about hairstyles using magic. So I tried my best to satisfy guests even without magic."

"You mean to tell me you're still bad at magic even with all your hard work...? Oh, could it be because you have multiple elemental affinities?" the girl guessed.

"I... Yes, you're correct."

Emma tilted her head curiously at the little girl, who automatically equated an ability to use magic well with multiple affinities. But her surprise didn't stop her from gently inserting the flower's stem up and behind the little girl's ear. *She would certainly look much cuter with pink streaking through her hair.*

"Yes! I look so cute! You did very well even without magic."

The girl hopped off the chair and skipped toward the mirror, where she stood twirling around happily. She scrutinized herself from the front, the left, and the right. Her round cheeks flushed in satisfaction as she turned every which way to

admire her new hairstyle. It was clear she loved Emma's work, which made Emma delighted and appreciative.

"I'm so pleased you like it, my lady."

"Okay! I've decided you deserve this!" The little girl rooted around in her bag slung diagonally across her body. Emma hurriedly tried to stop her.

"While I appreciate your sentiment, I can't accept payment since this is a festival for everyone to enjoy."

"It's not money. Here. This is a *la-bore kan-trak*. I think that's the right phrase."

"A-A labor contract...?" Emma blinked at the unexpected item the little girl held before her.

"That's right! I'm looking for a maid. I wanted someone cute, but you work hard and you're cautious. Your aura tells me you'll be great at magic someday, too! Plus, you made my hair look so pretty, even without magic! I know there's still time until you graduate, but I'll regret it if I don't *kan-trak* you right now."

Arms folded imperiously and her voice overflowing with confidence, she reminded Emma of Glen even more. *That aside, who in their right mind would allow an aristocratic little girl to not only wander around without an escort but also extend offers of employment...? This is bizarre.*

"Um... I beg your pardon, my lady, but who is accompanying you?" Emma asked. "Surely you must have a maid or attendant?"

"I came here by myself today. Because...my big brother is in the school somewhere."

Big brother...? Emma realized that her suspicion was on the mark.

"Well...my name is Emma Grace Seagrove. Won't you introduce yourself, my lady?"

"Brigitte."

Emma heard a familiar voice from behind her.

"Brother!!!"

The little girl called Brigitte flew toward Glen, her eyes sparkling.

“This is different from your usual hairstyle, but I find it quite lovely nonetheless,” Glen said.

“Yes! Emma did it for me!”

“Oh ho, did she now?” Unperturbed, Glen returned Brigitte’s smile with one of his own.

Emma... The person herself was taken aback by Brigitte’s casual use of her name, but she didn’t actually mind.

“Emma. I’m Brigitte.”

“She’s my cousin, but she might as well be my little sister since we’re close,” Glen explained. “Still only six years old.”

“Ahhh, it all makes sense now,” Emma hummed.

If Emma were this tiny and adorable, she’d want to address Glen the same way Brigitte did. Emma grinned at the thought. Then she heard another startling declaration.

“I’ve decided, Brother. I’m going to make Emma my maid. I was just about to ask her to sign a *la-bore kan-trak* when you arrived!”

“Ummm... Lady Brigitte...?” Emma started.

“See! See how perfectly she says my name? You must also be from a noble family, right, Emma? You should be pleased you get to work as a lady’s maid for a ducal family.”

Dumbfounded, Emma snuck a peek at Glen to discover him nonplussed as well. Though wee Brigitte appeared incredibly sweet and adorable on the surface, underneath lurked an iron will and a feisty personality.

“...Brigitte. Your escort has been worried to no end since you slipped away. You’ve had your fun for the day, so now it’s time for you to return,” Glen instructed.

“Emma. What do you think about an *es-kort* who can’t even keep an eye on a six-year-old? Would you be worried about your *safe-tee* because they’re

useless?”

Brigitte folded her arms again, haughtily. Her words and posture demanded Emma agree with her. By this point, a few of her classmates had stopped to see the show. But the little girl’s behavior resembled Glen’s so closely that Emma heard a few laughing.

“Lady Brigitte, though I’m grateful for your offer, I must regretfully decline,” Emma said gently. “I have much to learn, and I wouldn’t want to disappoint you. So, how about I make a suggestion? When my time to graduate from the Academy draws near, I want you to see me and determine if I have become a stupendous maid, fulfilling the potential you see in me. Should you deem me acceptable, then you can extend a labor contract to me in earnest, if I might be so bold to propose.”

“Booooo... Although I must say this is very like you, Emma. All right, I accept. It isn’t as if I need you to work for me right away, so I’ll wait for you.”

Hold on, what? Will she really wait for me? Brigitte said that last bit like it was the most natural thing in the world for her to do. Her sincerity delighted Emma. A beat later, Rashida gave her a light smack on the shoulder.

“You heard her, Emma. She said she’ll wait for you. Aren’t you just the luckiest girl in the world, hm?”

“I am indeed.”

Brigitte’s escort finally appeared, looking harried. After she said goodbye to them, the little girl left, holding hands with her bodyguard. Rashida stood next to her as they watched her walk away. Emma found newfound resolve at that moment.

As I am, I’m nowhere near good enough to be a lady’s maid... But if Lady Brigitte is willing to wait for me, then I’ll have to work much, much harder to become a superb maid. One my lady and her guardians will accept!

Second Year at the Magic Academy: Annette's Time Travel and Ending an Engagement

NATURALLY, Emma and Annette's classes in their second year were different. Fields of study and grades determined the class distribution. But for some unusual reason, Annette was peeking into Emma's class.

"Annette? What are you doing here?"

"Emma! I was hoping to get your advice on something."

Two things Emma found curious: one, that Annette had come all the way to her class deliberately; two, her restless, furtive glances. *Ah-ha!* Emma realized what this something was. Bernard. Without a doubt.



WOW... *It feels nostalgic to be back in this dormitory.* She was in Annette's room, in the dormitory she'd lived in during her original life. Emma looked around with interest. The only thing different was Annette herself. It was the first time she had seen such a grave expression on the other girl's face while she consulted Emma for advice.

The things Annette asked her for help with fell into three broad categories: homework and other assignments she wanted Emma's help with, Emma's assistance cleaning up the messes Annette created, and topics to discuss with Ian on the morning route to school.

"The truth is... I wanted to talk to you about Lord Bernard."

"Right, that little— I mean, him. What's wrong?" Emma's annoyance ticked up just hearing his name, which she refused to even say anymore unless necessary.

"Lately...he's been inviting me to spend time with him on the weekends. Just the two of us. I've been politely refusing him because I don't want to create any misunderstandings, but... Emma, did you and he perhaps squabble?"

She remained silent. *As if.* Emma hadn't even seen the louse for a long time.

So how could she have argued with him? He sent no letters, and on the rare occasions he caught sight of her in the cafeteria, he immediately departed—like prey fleeing from a hunter.

All it had taken for him to fear Emma was her obliquely alluding to her knowledge of his relationship with Annette on the first day of their first year. What she found truly impressive was that he had picked up on her intimation. He wasn't as moronic as she used to think.

Listening to Annette, though, Emma realized their relationship was one-sided, with only Bernard invested. Moreover, Annette talking to her about it presented greater proof of this. *I think this is the first time I actually feel sorry for him...*

In her original life, the three spent a lot of time together, and Emma trusted them from the bottom of her heart, never doubting either of them. That was why she saw the cracks in their bonds so clearly in this life—ones that had gone unnoticed by her previously. Regardless, Annette's overture was a good opportunity for Emma to ask about a few things. She started with the heart of the matter.

"Annette... Are you sure...you don't have feelings for Bernard?"

"Huh? Me?" Annette's big, round eyes widened even further as she blinked in surprise. Without any hesitation, she continued with her usual simple-minded innocence. "Well... I've thought him charming sometimes... But I'm fully aware that he's *your* fiancé, Emma! I don't go on outings with him alone or anything, so I have nothing to feel guilty about."

"I thought as much."

"Still...I'm not sure how to explain this... But Lord Bernard, without you, isn't as attractive. As if half his aura disappears when he's on his own... Actually, in hindsight, all of it does... I used to be grateful for his help, but then I realized he most likely only did that at your behest, Emma."

Emma found it hard to label Annette's words and tone, especially with the way she tapped her fingers against her cheek like she was seriously contemplating things. She couldn't even work up the energy to be outraged. *Wow, so in all seriousness, no joking whatsoever, I was the spice that kept their*

relationship alive.

Until now, Emma was under the impression that no matter what she'd done, it would have only been a matter of time until Bernard exposed his faults as well as his relationship with Annette. That was why she'd been incredibly optimistic about breaking off her engagement with him. In reality, Bernard's passion for Annette was such that he'd been inviting her out since their first year.

Except at present, Annette had no affection for Bernard. If anything, she seemed guarded, refusing his advances entirely, not even considering him a potential prospect. Things were not looking good for him.

While Annette chattered on, happy to spend time with Emma for the first time in a while, Emma stared at the other girl and sighed.



THE next day, Emma saw something she had *never* wanted to see. In a secluded area surrounded by a proliferation of trees, not far from the large garden and common area, the two sat on a single, ancient bench.

The young man leaned against the back of the bench, legs crossed, his arm around the young lady next to him. She had curled in on herself. It was an eyesore, but when Emma carelessly drew too close, her aggravation increased upon hearing their conversation.

“Annette. Truthfully, I despise the thought of marrying Emma. I want to protect you.”

“Oh... Really... So that's how you felt!”

Bernard favored the same line over and over again. He could at least try to be creative. And it sounded like the two weren't on the same wavelength.

Emma's class was in the middle of learning about the theory of applied magic, exclusive of elemental attributes. They ran out of magical materials for their experiments, so the three students sitting closest to the corridor were sent to the storehouse to resupply. Those three happened to be Emma, Victor, and Glen.

She wanted to commend their teacher for treating Victor and Glen like normal students, making no exceptions for their royal status. Yet she wished now that they weren't there with her because her luck ran out when she chose to take the shortcut through the garden. It would have been one thing for her alone to be subject to this melodramatic scene of Bernard and Annette so diligently conducting their secret rendezvous, their dedication to their personal theater so great that they were skipping their lessons. But Victor and Glen had to watch this farce play out as well.

"Annette, tell me the truth. How do you feel about me? You're always evading the question."

"Ummm... It isn't that I don't feel anything for you. Perhaps...I just need more time to get to know you. Yes, that's it!"

"What does that even mean?"

Hm... Annette is acting strange. Although she wanted to retch at Bernard's sickeningly wheedling tone, Emma cocked her head thoughtfully. Yesterday, during their conversation, Annette gave her the impression that she found Bernard's advances annoying.

The reality not far from her lent weight to her conclusion. She still found the conversation repulsive, but Annette was trying to fend off Bernard. Unfortunately for the other girl, her passive, non-confrontational personality made the task difficult.

Except if she truly wanted to reject Bernard, there was no need to come to a place like this. That was one point. Another was that, despite her nature, she could pluck up the nerve to refuse him much more directly and harshly. Emma suspected that something else bothered Annette.

She knew something was off, but she couldn't put the unnatural feeling into words. While she racked her brain, analyzing her discomfort, something tapped on her right arm. When she turned, Glen stared down at her anxiously. He didn't say anything, but his expression was different from his usual confident one. *Oh, right... He saw me vilify Bernard at the dinner party.*

"I'm fine," she whispered. "I don't even feel angry. Just annoyed that I ever let myself even be duped by them."

“I’ll take you at your word then.”

Hm... I should revise my thoughts on my lack of fortune. Having Prince Victor here might work in my favor. After viewing the situation from this new angle, Emma felt her heart dance giddily. The scene playing out before them couldn’t be called infidelity, yet the fact remained that Emma and Bernard’s engagement was pledged under His Majesty’s direction. If a formal objection to the betrothal entered the king’s ears, especially from his own son or one at least affirmed by him, even Count Sagden would have no choice but to accept its dissolution. No matter how much he protested.

“For now... Why don’t I dump some water on the fool?” Glen suggested.

“What a wonderful idea. I’ll do it myself,” Emma readily agreed.

“Um... Please don’t...” Victor interjected.

Just as Emma was about to start chanting a spell, “*Pillar of water, rage like a torrent,*” in response to Glen’s joking suggestion, Victor stopped her in her tracks. An epiphany jolted her as she stared at him. Victor was the embodiment of justice itself, a descendant of Reauxvil’s royal line, one that placed tremendous importance on law, order, and discipline. His face was scarlet with fury.

Along with Ian, Emma had interacted with Victor since they were young. Unlike his remarkably lenient older brother, the crown prince Wheeler, Victor was serious and earnest. In her original timeline, during the dinner party in her honor where she had been so brutally humiliated, he immediately noted the change in the atmosphere and rushed to her aid as quickly as he could. He had declared himself her staunch ally, and the rest of that night transpired as it had.

“What are you doing?! I demand an explanation at once!” Victor stomped through the thicket directly toward the bench where Bernard and Annette sat. Emma and Glen glanced at each other before racing after him.

“Th-This... I... Y-Your Highness, this is—”

Bernard jerked his arm from around Annette’s shoulders and stood up in a panic. Annette remained seated in shock, her face pallid. *Unnaturally pallid,* Emma thought.

“You swore to uphold your engagement to Lady Emma, daughter of Viscount Seagrove, in front of the king himself!” Victor roared.

“R-Right, I did. I did indeed.”

“Then explain yourself. What is the meaning of those words you spoke to this lady? You should be well aware that the title of count granted to your father, one you will someday inherit, was conferred so Lady Emma could live her life freely and comfortably in the future. Does this mean you only used her and the royal family for your own dastardly purposes?”

“N-N-N-No! No, no, no! You couldn’t be more wrong, Your Highness! I-I was just using a figure of speech. Yes, that’s right. Carried away by the atmosphere, you know.”

Glen, amused, smoothly fired off a verbal rally to aid Victor. “Interesting... Skipping class to conduct a clandestine rendezvous, eh? Makes one question the disposition of an heir to the family chosen as the prize for the time traveler, hm, Prince Victor?”

“Yes! Yes, it most definitely does!”

“E-E-E-E-E-Exactly as you say, Prince Victor!” Annette’s unexpected declaration sounded particularly biting against Bernard. “I-I-I-I’m always receiving invitations from Lord Bernard. And he’s forever saying how his engagement to Emma is just a means of securing his family’s elevation of rank!”

What in the world?! Not only was Emma shocked, but she struggled to make sense of this surprising turn of events. Annette was a spoiled, shy girl. In tense situations like this, she normally hid behind someone and sobbed hysterically. This Annette wasn’t adhering to that pattern. Her face was just as red as Victor’s as she hurled censure at Bernard, her eyes moist with angry tears.

“You can rest assured that I will be speaking to His Majesty about this matter because it affects the royal family’s honor,” Victor declared.

“N-No... Please... I...” Bernard collapsed on the bench, stunned by Victor’s declaration.

“Um... When would that be, Your Highness?”

Emma felt another unpleasant jolt of discomfort when she heard Annette's resolute tone. Something was definitely different about this version of her old friend.

"I'll send him a letter immediately, so I should receive his approval to rescind the engagement in less than a week," Victor said. "But this is none of your concern because, clearly, you weren't reciprocating this fool's advances."

"Oh, please don't concern yourself with me... More importantly, um..." Annette glanced at Emma.

"Ah, yes. Lady Emma. You must be terribly shocked by today's events. Why don't you return to your dormitory and rest? Glen and I will take care of resupplying our class with the magical materials. I'll also inform the teacher of your absence."

"Thank you for your consideration, Your Highness, but I feel fine. You don't have to worry about me." Emma's reply was calm and composed. Far from being shocked, she wanted to curtsy deeply to Bernard in thanks. He slumped in a daze, crushed by how badly things had spiraled out of control. She couldn't have hoped for a better outcome.

"E... Emma..." Annette seemed like she wanted to say something to Emma.

Glen murmured to the girl so that Victor couldn't hear. "Later. Can you come back here after classes are over for the day?"

"I... Yes. But, um, may I request only your presence and Emma's, Lord Glen?"

Emma realized Glen had been perturbed by Annette's behavior as well. The other girl's eyes looked uncertain but determined.



AFTER school, Emma, Glen, and Annette gathered at the same place where the quagmire had unfolded. Bernard's flattened, despairing figure was nowhere to be found, naturally.

"Today... You didn't want Ian to be here, did you?" Emma spoke to Annette, her whole body tight with strain. It was an attempt on her part to have a silly conversation so her friend would relax. But she unintentionally got straight to

the heart of the matter with her remark.

“You’re right... Because today, I’m violating the taboo of time travel... For your sake, Emma,” Annette confessed.

“What?!”

Glen and Emma gasped in unison, and Annette thrust out her right hand and chanted a spell.

“Sigil, activate.”

When she did, deeply familiar red digits appeared.

“For Emma’s sake... Can you elaborate?” Glen asked.

“Yes.”



ANNETTE recounted her tale. She had arrived this morning from the world four years in the future, not long after she had awakened to her time affinity. She couldn’t give them all the details, but she said that Emma from her future didn’t seem to be enjoying her life. That was why Annette reversed time to the turning point in her life she deemed the start of Emma’s future unhappiness. Emma and Glen understood why she couldn’t tell them about the future. Even so, there were too many points in her story that they couldn’t understand—too many holes.

“What exactly do you mean by me being unhappy four years from now...?” Emma asked.

“Emma, do you remember when I wanted your advice on what to do about Lord Bernard’s advances?”

Coincidentally enough, it had happened yesterday, so Emma nodded.

“Of course, I do.”

“Emma, I think you’re surprised to learn about my time magic, but... Something even more shocking happens in the future. In the world I come from, you demanded to break off your engagement with Lord Bernard. As a result, the relations between your family and Vis... I mean, Count Sagden’s worsens

considerably. Because you feel responsible for the situation, you end up being unable to say no in the end.”

“Oh... I see...”

Emma had no trouble accepting Annette’s explanation since what she described fell within her expectations. *But what does she mean by “I can’t say no in the end”?*

Glen spoke, correctly guessing Emma’s confusion. “You mean because of everything else that hangs on the engagement?”

“That’s right! But... But no one would have been able to refuse in her situation! I-I mean, after all...”

Annette gasped and shut her mouth, realizing she might have revealed too much about her future. Then she inhaled quietly to calm herself before speaking again.

“In any case, I came back to the past. Instead of turning down his invitations, I decided to accept them! If everyone found out he committed adultery with me, even Count Sagden couldn’t complain about the engagement being ended on those grounds, right? I admit, I was uncertain about how this would play out because I heard the past can’t be changed... But it worked! I accepted Lord Bernard’s invitation to rendezvous, and what’s more, Prince Victor just happened to be there as well. I couldn’t have been luckier! Now, Emma, you won’t be unhappy in the future...!”

“So regardless of how or when, Victor always ends up embroiled in this...”

Based on Annette’s spirited explanation, Glen looked thoughtful, coming to some conclusion Emma couldn’t follow. Now that she had more or less told them what she could, Annette looked satisfied.

“Right, then, I’ll be going back to the future! Emma... I-I know it’s forbidden to go into the past. B-But you’re special to me. You always, always helped me when I needed it, and I never returned the favor. So I thought this was my chance to finally do something for you.”

“Understood... Thank you.”

Emma experienced a sense of nostalgia as they talked. On the day of the royal function, she was shocked when she learned about Annette and Bernard's relationship. Being betrayed by the two people she trusted the most had been such a bolt out of the blue that she had recklessly allowed her rage free rein.

Even though most of her fury had been directed at Bernard, it still profoundly impacted her relationship with Annette in her second life, leaving it in a strange limbo. Despite logically knowing the Annette in this life was different from the one who had committed adultery with her friend's fiancé, Emma had deliberately kept the other girl at a distance. But when she thought about the fact that Annette had broken the cardinal law of time travel and reversed time for her sake, she wondered if their friendship had, in fact, remained strong. Thinking about it relieved her.

"O-Oh, I almost forgot to tell you one more thing!" Annette said. "Just in case...I suggest you ask His Majesty for another reward instead of a fiancé, as soon as possible! I know you have an idea of what you would rather receive, right?"

"Huh?! Well... I do."

"I... I hope you're happy when I go back to the future, Emma."



With that last whisper, Annette chanted the spell to take her back to her time. She shut her eyes, and her body wavered during the time leap. Glen quickly supported her, and Emma took a position on her other side. A few seconds later, Annette slowly opened her eyes.

“Huh... Why am I here?”

“Heh. Annette... Thank you.”

“Huh, Emma? What’s wrong?”

Seeing her former close friend’s usual vapid smile, Emma hugged her tightly. Just as she expected, Annette remembered nothing of what happened that morning since the future Annette had inhabited her consciousness. But because of her naturally airheaded, simple disposition, she didn’t seem troubled by what was happening.

Thank goodness for the small things. She violated the one rule of time travel but did it anyway, even knowing the past couldn’t be changed... I guess she had this unknown side to her as well.

After Emma and Glen escorted Annette safely back to her dorm room, Emma questioned him.

“So...despite her lacking a time affinity right now, she was still able to return to this period.”

“Hm? Oh, yes. Just like their memories, a person’s elemental attributes are connected to their souls, not their bodies. Our consciousness is the driving force behind our abilities,” Glen explained.

That makes sense, actually.

“The Annette today... I wonder which future she returned to,” Emma mused.

“There’s only one timeline, so it must be the future that we create, the one that results from our choices.”

“But the Annette who’s here, doesn’t know what happened. If the future does change and I end up happy, then she wouldn’t have ever returned to the past in the first place. Doesn’t that create an endless loop of contradictions?”

“The present is always remaking the future, so there’s no need to force human logic on the mechanism to make it make sense. Just know that it exists,” Glen said.

“So that’s how it is, hm?”

Emma simultaneously understood what he meant and also didn’t. Though she was an honor student herself, she also knew she wasn’t nearly as intelligent as Glen. Glad once more that he was on her side, she gave up on wrapping her head around the complexities of time travel.

“I have to admit, her timing was excellent. If she had returned to a point before you obtained Ulster’s version of the time affinity, she wouldn’t have been able to change anything,” Glen said.

“I agree. Otherwise, I might have been tempted to go into the future out of worry. Now I don’t need to, so I’m grateful to her for leaping back here.”

Annette had been in high spirits because she’d been hopeful that the future would change with her action. But the reality was a little different. This world had already been remade because of Emma’s time reversal, and that’s why the future would change. *I think it’s best to avoid using this power as much as possible.*

“By the way... Did you notice Miss Annette was hinting at your engagement with Prince Victor?”

Resolved again to avoid meddling with her power, Emma heard the stunning revelation echo ever so casually in her ears.

“I beg your pardon?!” Her eyes widened in bewilderment. “That’s impossible. Have you forgotten I come from a low-ranked aristocratic family?”

“True. Except it would be possible once your family’s status is elevated further as a reward for your work as a time traveler.”

Glen’s conjecture was specific. He wouldn’t say something like this unless he was sure about it. *Well... I can’t deny that the king is a kind person. I wouldn’t be surprised if he felt sorry for me after learning about the series of unfortunate events affecting me. On the other hand, affiancing me to his second son is too much, even for him.*

In most cases, the monarchy didn't host a celebration for time travelers retiring from their official duties. Yet, for whatever reason, the king decreed the dinner party in Emma's honor because of how much he and his advisors appreciated her efforts. Within the history of unprecedented events, the dinner party had been extraordinary in that sense. From this perspective, she conceded that Glen might have a point.

"Perhaps Annette's last words were meant to push me into declaring I don't require a betrothal in the first place. Since I was apparently unable to refuse a supposed match after breaking off my engagement with Bernard?" she asked.

"That's also a strong possibility."

Glen... He's from the same future as I am... Right? Staring at the sharply intuitive young man who seemed to know too much about too many things, Emma pondered everything in silence, head tilted thoughtfully.



SEVERAL days later, Emma and Ian were in the palace chamber designated for time travelers.

"It feels like ages since we've been here."

"Indeed, as we've been able to complete most of the jobs lately from the Academy without any issues."

Emma's duties as a time traveler remained unchanged in her second life. When she received the same assignments as the ones she'd undertaken in her original life, it didn't take her long to report on those findings. And any new ones she had been able to accomplish quickly with brief trips into the future.

Once Emma realized her new power could change the future, she became reluctant to use it. *In my old life, I used it pragmatically and without hesitation because I considered it a normal part of my job. But now, I try my best not to look too deeply into the future for fear of wanting to change it.*

"In any case, it doesn't really make a difference since I'll only be pretending to use my power here, just like I usually do nowadays," she said.

"Agreed. But I think you should utilize this space occasionally, even if you're

only pretending, to keep up appearances,” Ian advised.

Time travelers left their bodies behind in this room while their consciousness flew into the future. In her second life, the monarchy allowed Emma to conduct her missions from the Academy because she used the pretext of prioritizing her academics. But Ian’s suggestion was sound, so she would have to make more of an effort to use this room. She didn’t want to raise any red flags.

“In truth, His Majesty summoned us today.”

“What?!” Emma froze in shock. That was news to her. “Why... Why didn’t you tell me...”

They arrived here right after classes ended for the day. That meant Emma was still in her school uniform instead of proper formal attire. Ian was in his, as well, except social convention wasn’t nearly as rigorous for men. For a noble’s daughter like her, though, her current appearance was an abject failure to uphold etiquette, and she worried she’d be seen as discourteous and disrespectful to the king.

“Forgive me, Emma. His Majesty didn’t want to make you nervous, so he instructed me to bring you here without informing you first.”

“Then thank you for telling me now, Ian.”

I knew he had to have a good reason. Once they exited the special room for time travelers, they found Victor waiting outside. He must have also come from the Academy for the impending audience with his father.

“Ian, Miss Emma. This way.”

When his eyes met Emma’s, he gave her his usual smile, emanating his pure sense of justice. Instead of leading them to the chamber reserved for guests, he took them to the parlor facing one of the palatial gardens. Beyond the stately double doors, a table had been set up by the windows. His Majesty awaited them there.

“Lady Emma. It has been quite some time since we last met, hm?”

At the king’s gentle greeting, Emma curtsied politely.

“Yes, it has, Your Majesty. I thank you for...inviting us here today.”

She paused and carefully selected the word “invite” after noting the tea service prepared for them. *The king is a very busy man, so to have him set up like this... What’s happening?* Emma glanced inquiringly at Ian, but he shook his head, just as confused as her. *I guess we’ll find out soon enough.*

“I can tell from your expressions that you don’t know why I summoned you. Am I right?”

His Majesty, always kind but majestic, nodded at two chairs, encouraging Emma and Ian to sit. Once Victor took his own seat at the table, Ian followed. Emma was the last to settle in hers. *He always indulges me... But this is the first time I’ve seen His Majesty behave in such a manner.* Anxiety pulled her nerves tight. Emma unconsciously started tapping a foot on the floor.

“Lady Emma, I’d like to reconsider the marriage contract between the Sagden and Seagrove families. Which is why I invited you here today.” The king picked up his teacup and carried it to his lips. His thick fingers wrapped around the handle made the cup look incredibly tiny and fragile. “First, is it true you wish to cancel your engagement to Count Sagden’s son? My son informed me he witnessed a scene wherein your intended acted unfaithfully.”

“Yes, that’s correct. For myself and for my family’s sake, I wish to end this betrothal as quickly as feasible.” Despite her nerves, Emma replied smoothly, which reassured her. It indicated how strongly she felt about the situation.

“I see. Then consider it done. Because of my lack of due diligence in forming this arrangement... I caused you pain, and for that, I’m sorry.”

“That is not the case at all, Your Majesty. If anything, I must beg your pardon for bothering you with such a trivial matter, knowing how busy you are.”

The king’s eyes were full of sympathy as he stared at Emma’s bowed head. Then he glanced at his son, seated next to him. At Victor’s slight nod, his father spoke again. “The truth is... We think quite highly of you. From the time you were but a child to now, you have done your utmost for the country and the royal family.”

“I’m very grateful for your exceedingly kind words.” Emma intuitively knew the conversation was veering in the wrong direction.

“And so. In exchange, I’ll once more make arrangements for rewards to be bestowed upon you after your work as a time traveler ends, so your future may be happy and unburdened.”

“Begging your pardon, Your Majesty! I’m so sorry to interrupt, but may I say one thing!”

She knew interrupting the king was outrageously disrespectful. She knew, but she didn’t care. Because the possibility was high that the outcome would be what Glen had predicted.

“Yes, yes, of course. I invited you here today because I wanted to hear *your* opinions before I approached your father. So speak freely, child.”

“Thank you so much, Your Majesty. I... I want to work as a lady’s maid abroad once I graduate from the Magic Academy.”

“Well, well... Do you indeed?” The king nodded slowly in thought, surprised to hear of Emma’s dream.

“Thus, I think of the dissolution of my engagement with Bernard Sagden as a clean slate for myself—a chance to start anew. I love my country, so please don’t doubt my patriotism. But I want to challenge myself abroad.”

Determined to convey that she didn’t require a fiancé as a reward, Emma subconsciously infused passion into her words.

“I see, I see... Then perhaps the tradition of the royal family choosing a partner for a noble young lady in recognition of her services as a time traveler might be an antiquated one, despite its well-intentioned nature to make sure she’s provided for in her future.”

“I find I agree, Your Majesty.” Victor concurred with his father’s soft but earnest assertion.

“If I might be so bold, I humbly request freedom as my reward,” Emma declared. “More specifically, my wish is for my duties as a time traveler to end when I graduate from the Academy. That way, I can apply for employment more easily.”

Everyone in the parlor knew Emma’s argument was sound. Regardless of

what profession one entered in the Monarchy of Reauxvil, the best time to look for work was when a citizen had just graduated from the Academy.

“Hm... Recently, no one possessing an affinity for time has been born, though I think it will happen soon enough... Lady Emma, remind me again how much time you have left on your ability?”

“If she continues time traveling at this rate, two to three years, approximately, Your Majesty.” Ian answered the king’s question with a smile.

“So even if you choose to retire early, it’s still within the margin of error. Understood. Then, once it gets close to your retirement, we might have to squeeze in many requests until the last minute, but consider your wish fulfilled, Lady Emma.”

“I... Thank you very much, Your Majesty.”

I wonder if Annette from the future is at peace now. She bowed her head deeply again in gratitude to the king.



A month had passed since Emma declared to the king she had no need for or interest in another engagement. That morning, she received a letter from her father.

“I went to the palace for a meeting with the king and former Count Sagden. Along with the annulment of the engagement between the Sagden and Seagrove families, Count Sagden was demoted to Viscount Sagden...”

She tossed the three-page letter on top of her bed. The pages rustled as they landed. *Blast... There was no need to strip the count of his title!* The downgrade might seem natural in light of Bernard’s actions. But it was still a harsh judgment, considering the relations between the two families as well as the gossip at school.

“Blast him. Despite his constant avoidance of me, he had no issue whatsoever shrewdly telling others about our betrothal.”

Frankly speaking, Emma already stood out in school because of how strongly she resembled her grandmother, who’d been known as the Captivating Siren. It

would have been one thing if it were her looks that always attracted attention. But her friends were Duke Eslan's daughter, Rashida; Marquess Stephenson's son, Ian; and the handsome exchange student from the Olano Kingdom, Glen. Not to mention Prince Victor, who occasionally joined them. Keeping such illustrious company only made her more fodder for gossip.

Incidentally, Emma and Ian cared not a whit about their appearance and acted accordingly. But Glen and Rashida were fully aware of their beauty, and their behavior conveyed that self-knowledge. The marked contrast in their attitudes and carriage intrigued other students, so the four friends often found themselves the center of attention.

The result of all that, then? Bernard's need to feel superior to the so-called masses led him to use Emma's existence for his own self-aggrandizement. She should have expected it because it was exactly something he'd do.

I hope the rumors don't twist into something strange... Events like this spread through the grapevine in the blink of an eye. Along the way, hearsay and other falsehoods would be slipped in, eventually transforming an incident into something outrageous. By then, should the people involved from the start learn of the gossip, they would find the final form unrecognizable from the original truth.

"I think he went to the meeting yesterday, so... This means Bernard should have received a similar letter from his father."

Though Emma was excited to head to school every morning, dread consumed her today.



LATER the same day, Emma went to the cafeteria with Rashida, Ian, and Glen for lunch. But the atmosphere felt abnormal. Other students whispered to each other, pointing constantly at Emma. *This is Bernard's doing, isn't it?* She didn't want to know what rumors had already spread, yet it was clear that whatever was being said about her was far from the truth.

"Are you all right...?"

That morning, she told Rashida everything so her friend would be prepared.

Now, though her words were calm, her tone was anything but as her anger leaked through.

“I am. Don’t let this bother you.”

In truth, Emma seethed, too. But the target and source of her rage was nowhere to be found. She predicted she wouldn’t be seeing him anytime soon, anyway. Not when he always took care to make sure his lunches didn’t line up with hers.

“Emma. I don’t think we should stay here. You’ll only be hurt,” Ian said.

“...No. I refuse to surrender to this nonsense.”

Emma shook her head at Ian’s suggestion. She had done nothing wrong, so why did *she* have to retreat? Unfortunately, she couldn’t find a place or person to vent her anger on.

She bet the students here titillated themselves at her expense after listening to whatever lies and slander Bernard had said about her. They probably held no malice, but as far as they were concerned, they believed Bernard since she had yet to comment. There was nothing she could do about his conspicuous absence, either.

“Let’s have lunch at the cafe by the dormitory. I’ve been itching to try their limited-time seasonal menu. You’ll join me, won’t you?” Rashida took Emma’s hand in hers and stood up. Ian nodded in agreement.

“Lady Rashida, please look after Emma. Glen and I have some business to take care of.”

“All...right.”

Knowing she was outwitted, Emma gave in to her friends’ kindness.



AFTER Emma and Rashida left the cafeteria, Ian asked Glen.

“So... What’s the plan?”

“We have no choice but to wait here.”

Glen hadn’t said a word since they arrived in the cafeteria earlier. Now his

eyes burned with fury.



SOMETHING’S *strange*. The afternoon class was a combined lesson with Ian and Glen’s class. Rashida’s suggestion provided Emma with a much-needed refuge. Once they finished lunch, they headed back to the lecture hall, but inside, the atmosphere felt off.

She was fully prepared to receive other students’ reproachful stares. Despite not knowing the details of whatever that *thing* had said about her, she knew it wouldn’t have been anything good. Instead of censure, curiosity permeated the room. Like she was a celebrity, and they were dying to know her secrets. They kept sneaking glances at her as if expecting something, but no one spoke to her. It was as though if someone *did* approach her, they would *all* stampede. That was how charged the atmosphere felt.

What...is...even...happening? Emma glanced at Rashida, who seemed just as baffled. It was entirely different from what they had been anticipating. Then one of their classmates walked up to them. Her name was Gina, and she was also in their applied life magic class.

“Lady Emma, how calamitous all this must have been for you. Please accept my well wishes.”

“Oh, thank you. But the truth is...”

Realizing that everyone’s attention was on them, Emma mustered up her courage and decided to reveal everything, to clear up any misunderstanding. She spoke loudly and clearly, her voice projecting to the farthest reaches of the lecture hall. But before she could get another word in, Gina continued. Never in her wildest dreams could she have imagined the words that spilled next from her classmate’s mouth.

“I must say, though, I was quite jealous of you. To have Lord Glen defend you so fiercely. I’ve never seen such an expression on his face.”

“D-Defend me...? Glen’s expression...?”

Emma had no idea what she was talking about. What on earth happened after she left the cafeteria? She thought hard about what Gina had said, but she

couldn't make heads or tails of it. So she turned to inspect her classmates' faces, especially the girls, to aid her own understanding of what might have transpired.

She realized now that what she had pegged as curiosity were eyes sparkling with envy, though not necessarily angry. She was right about her analogy of fans waiting for their favorite celebrity to reveal their secrets. Her classmates' rapt, excited faces told her they waited impatiently for her reaction like they were excited for the next development in a romance novel. Incidentally, romance novels provided the greatest source of entertainment for both girls and women with their depictions of unattainable dreams.

"Lord Glen was enraged by Lord Bernard spreading such nasty rumors about you, Lady Emma."

"I... He... What..."

Without even knowing his exact words, Emma realized Glen was responsible for making these young ladies' eyes sparkle. It was no longer suspicion on her part but a fact. While she repeatedly opened and closed her mouth as thoughts came and went rapidly, Gina blushed slightly.

"You don't understand how infuriated Lord Glen was by Lord Bernard's besmirching of your honor, Lady Emma. He declared in front of everyone that you were special to him."

"Wha—"

Emma unwittingly shrieked at the words that exceeded her imagination.

"My favorite part of his lambasting was when he said, 'I'd like nothing more than to bundle her in the finest silk and protect her from everyone and everything. So to hell with an imbecile like you.' Many of Lord Glen's fans screamed in excitement at that point."

"S...s...silk?!"

"Hm, what else, what else..."

"Miss Gina, I think you can stop there."

A voice came from above. Turning around, Emma found Glen and Ian. It

seemed they had also just returned from lunch.

“I’ll take that as my cue to make myself scarce.”

Gina giggled, beamed at Glen, then went back to her seat. Standing in front of the hall entrance, Emma remained frozen, staring at him. No doubt her face was scarlet. Her whole body felt hot, from her earlobes down to the tips of her toes. No one said anything to refute Gina’s remarks, which meant they were almost 100 percent true.

“You should be fine now. But if anything happens again, just tell me, all right?”

Saying his piece so smoothly and matter-of-factly, Glen found an empty seat and headed toward it, leaving her behind. His devil-may-care attitude made it hard for her to believe that ten, maybe fifteen minutes ago, he had uttered anything Gina had so happily related to her.

I-I don’t think I’ll be fine at all, good sir. With her head so full of Glen, Emma completely forgot about her anger at Bernard.

Second Year at the Magic Academy: Date

“EMMA. Did you submit your application for permission to leave the school grounds tomorrow?”

“Of course! You know I wouldn’t miss our outing for the world!”

Emma’s seventeenth birthday would soon be here. In the front of the closet hung a new silk dress. It was a birthday present from her grandmother. She’d had it custom-made for Emma by a tailor she had been acquainted with for a long time.

Even though I’ll actually be twenty-one and not seventeen. That was why she’d asked her grandmother to fashion a simple but adult design. For all the countries under the Empire of Ulster’s banner, twenty was the age of majority, marking a turning point in their citizens’ lives. In this life, her twenty-first birthday was still a ways off, but mentally, she already considered herself an adult.

Tomorrow was a day off at the Academy. Rashida wanted to give her a unique birthday present, so they would be going out into the city. Of her own accord, Emma studied every day and would normally prefer to do the same on their day off. But a date with her best friend was special and called for an exception. Impatient for a new day to dawn, Emma slipped into bed, bubbling with excitement.



THE next day, Emma stood, flabbergasted, in the driveway in front of the main gate.

“Why...are *you* here, Glen?”

She thought she would be going out with Rashida and Ian. Except Glen was there, too, now.

“I only found out myself a few minutes ago,” Rashida said. “But this isn’t a

problem, right, Emma? The more, the merrier.”

“I had a feeling I’d find myself bored while you and Lady Rashida shopped, so I invited Glen to join us.”

And with that, Ian took Rashida’s hand and escorted her to the carriage. He always escorted Emma, but it seemed today would be different.

“Does my being here make you uncomfortable?” Glen asked bluntly, and naturally and politely extended his hand toward Emma. His gesture was so crisp and elegant, he gave off the air of a prince and enthralled her. Simultaneously, she remembered that was exactly what he was.

Right... He restrained even Victor from acting recklessly...with just a lift of his hand.

“Of course...not.”

Truthfully, she was ecstatic to go out with him. Plus, the only times she’d ever seen him out of school uniform were during their first year of summer and the dinner party in her original timeline. All she wanted to do was get her fill of him, yet she couldn’t meet his eyes as she took his hand. He walked her to the coach and, after helping her in, boarded himself.

Once they arrived in the city, the four enjoyed a delicious lunch. Right after it ended, though, Ian said something curious.

“To be frank, Father asked me to do a favor for him.”

“Oh, my, Lord Ian, what a coincidence. My mother asked me to run an errand for her as well.”

Huh...? Emma’s eyes widened at Rashida’s transparent act.

“Is that right? I guess this means we’ll be going our separate ways then.”

“Why, I do agree, sir. Glen, take care of Emma, won’t you?”

Before she could get a word in, Ian and Rashida disappeared into the heart of the city.

“What...just...happened?”

Unable to process the past few minutes, Emma looked up at Glen,

bewildered.

“Are you unhappy about this?” he asked.

“No. Of course not. But...”

“Then don’t look a gift horse in the mouth. Let’s go.”

He took a step forward but waited patiently for her. Once she could move again, he matched his gait to hers as they strolled. Ian did the same, too, but with him, she didn’t experience this wild fluttering in her belly. Emma valiantly attempted to hide her smile by looking down as she walked next to Glen. After a short while, he stepped into a small shop selling hair accessories.

“Do you visit the city often, Glen?”

“No. Only on rare occasions. I visited a few times in my previous life for educational purposes... But this marks the first in this life.”

“Hmmm.”

She tilted her head curiously as she looked around the shop. It seemed familiar for some reason.

“Would you show us a few of your best hair accessories?”

“Of course, sir.”

She browsed while Glen and the shop clerk talked in the background. Despite its snug interior, the shop had a variety of hair ornaments on display, each and every one delicately, beautifully made. Everything was of such high quality that they felt otherworldly.

It’s all so expensive. I’d have to beg Father for months in advance to get him to buy me one for my birthday. Since her grandmother had already gifted her with a fine-quality dress, Emma decided to wheedle her father for something from here next year.

“Which one catches your eye?” Glen asked her.

“Oh, did you come here to choose a present for someone?” she responded.

“Something like that.”

She took no notice of Glen’s ambiguous reply. She was captivated by the hair

accessories draped over velvet fabric on the counter. Lowering her face, she scrutinized each one carefully.

“Wow, these are all so lovely!” she exclaimed.

Five ornaments were on display. The first was an elegant barrette made of tiny pearls. The second was a gorgeous accessory with clear gems modeled in a flower pattern. The third showed off a subdued gemstone accented by smaller, sparkling gems. Next was a clasp painted rose gold and covered in delicate and colorful gems. And the last looked like a butterfly from a distance, made of glittering rhinestones.

Each was so expertly and brilliantly crafted, down to the most minute detail, that Emma hesitated to touch them.

“Who’s the recipient, Glen? Tell me more about her. Age, what she’s like. They’re all so gorgeous, but I need to know more about her to choose one that suits her.”

He said nothing, so Emma turned around with a frown.

“Come on, tell me already! First things first. How old is she?”

“...Twenty-one.”

“Got it. Then we’ll exclude this one and this one because they’re a wee bit childish.” She nixed numbers four and five as contenders. “What else? Do you know her favorite color or one she prefers in her wardrobe?”

“Hm... I believe she hates light pink.”

“I’m starting to form an image of her. I think she might be the type who likes simple, mature designs. Which leaves us with these two.”

Emma indicated the barrette made of pearls and the one featuring a subdued gemstone surrounded by smaller sparkling ones. *They’re both so pretty... I can’t choose!* She considered the two options gravely.

“What about the color of her hair and eyes? Also, is she the cute type or a great beauty?”

“...She has dark brown hair and blue eyes. Most would consider her a great beauty.”

“Does she often attend balls, tea parties, and other social functions?”

“...She’s invited to such events, and her conduct is impeccable when she goes, but I don’t think she enjoys them.”

“I see, I see... If we’re speaking about quality alone, I would recommend the pearl piece... But the color of this gemstone is so unusual and beautiful... I can’t choose... Glen, what sort of relationship do you have with her? Is she an older sister or a relative? What’s her personality like?”

Emma’s questions sounded more like an interrogation and kept getting more personal. He shook his head, a wry smile on his lips.

“Enough.”

“Huh?”

“I want you to keep your gaze trained outside the window. Your beloved fruit cart will pass by soon.”

Blast. It seemed he had decided she wasn’t useful in the decision-making process. *Well, I beg your pardon! How is a girl to choose just one when she has such tempting options before her?!*

Miffed, Emma did his bidding, turning her attention to the scenery outside. Just like he said, a fruit vendor appeared, leisurely pulling their stall along. *Oooh! I’ll buy some to take back to the dormitory!*

“Glen, I’m stepping out, okay?”

“Wait.”

Just as she was about to exit the shop, he gently grasped her wrist. Emma’s heart leapt at his touch.

“Don’t forget, we’re still in a city, so it isn’t uncommon for unaccompanied women and children to be accosted when they wander. I’m almost done here. Be patient for a little longer.”

While he spoke, the clerk expertly and carefully wrapped the hair piece before slipping it inside a high-quality bag. Then the clerk politely handed it to Glen. Nodding his thanks, he opened the door, and they headed outside. He looked down at her with the usual gleam of mischief in his eyes.

“Besides, I *am* your escort for today, aren’t I? Or perhaps you’d prefer Ian?”

Ack...! Emma finally realized who he bought the hair accessory for. The circumstances for him joining them on today’s outing. Rashida and Ian’s strange behavior and departure from their group. Everything clicked in her mind. Lastly, the bag he was placing in Emma’s hands. The same one he’d just received from the shop clerk.

“It’s your birthday soon, isn’t it?”

“May I...open it?”

Glen silently looked away, which she took as tacit consent. She opened the bag and saw the lovely barrette made entirely of pearls. *Oh my goodness!* Then she noticed another box inside the bag. *Surely he didn’t.* Ever so tentatively, she pulled it out and opened it. Inside, she found the hair accessory set with the subdued gemstone accented by smaller, colorful ones. *This one too?!*



“Glen. One is expensive enough, but *two*? I can’t accept these...”

“One is for your seventeenth birthday and the other for your twenty-first. I could tell you liked both, so it worked out perfectly for two birthdays, don’t you think?”

“But... That’s not the point, and you know it!”

Glen narrowed his eyes at Emma’s stubbornness. “I wanted to be the first to give you a gift for your twenty-first birthday. If I only gave you one, it would only be for your seventeenth, and I couldn’t tolerate the thought. So no more arguments. I want you to accept both.”

His words made her face flame violently. All anyone looking at her now would see was a beet-red tomato. Normally, she’d already be desperately hiding her flushed face from him, but, today, a small part of her wanted him to notice. She thought it might make him happy to know he could stir such a reaction in her.

“Then...thank you. I’ll cherish them both. Forever.”

Glen nodded, satisfied that Emma was being honest with him and herself. *Still... What exactly is our relationship?* Despite giving her such extravagant gifts on her birthday, he hadn’t said a word or even hinted at his feelings. On the one hand, she had an idea based on his actions, so words weren’t *strictly* necessary. Rather than being dissatisfied with his lack of an overt declaration, she had the feeling that his affections for her were so deep that he sought no reciprocity.

But even if he put his feelings for her into words, Emma knew the only way she’d respond was something along the lines of, “I thought as much. Actually, I feel the same way as you. Although you probably already knew, yes?” She sensed he didn’t want that from her. From the moment they exchanged their first words at the dinner party in her original life, she realized his love had been unconditional. *Is that even possible?*

Back in the confines of the carriage, Emma remained indecisive as her mind whirled with possibilities.

Third Year at the Magic Academy: Secrets Revealed

TIME passed. Emma, now a third-year, would soon graduate from the Magic Academy. She practiced diligently throughout the summer recess and breezed through the large-scale exams that took place once the new term started. She had high hopes for her report card. The only thing troubling her was that she hadn't yet secured employment.

The school festival took place that day, and the night of the festival was special for third-years, who only had a few months left until graduation. In the Academy's massive courtyard, they would gather for a special celebration. And under the late autumn starry sky, as they stared up at the heavens, they would pour spirits for each other, whiling the night away.

Most third-years would participate in the party. First- and second-years could watch them from their dormitory windows. Many lanterns were strung up in the courtyard for the event, and there was a special cafe. It was a wondrous, bustling sight.

"I can't believe the festival is over already." Rashida huddled under a blanket that warded off the cold.

"Indeed. The only events left are the graduation exam and graduation party... Rashida, you'll attend the vocational school in Ulster after we graduate, right? The one that specializes in training servants?"

Emma was saddened, even though she broached the topic herself. She considered changing it, but the conversation would eventually return to their plans after graduation anyway, so there would be no point. That was just how much weight the future held.

"Yup! Despite Father's dogged opposition, which gave me grief to no end these past few years, he ultimately gave in easily enough. Exasperating man."

"Of course he did! Because you worked hard to prove yourself, Rashida. You're amazing for achieving and maintaining grades so outstanding that even

your father couldn't find any reason to complain."

"I could say the same about you, Emma. You finished top in our grade for applied life magic, despite struggling so much with it in the beginning. Not to mention the letter of recommendation the Academy gave you. The world is your oyster as far as your future employment is concerned!"

While the two reminisced about their three years' worth of memories, one of their classmates served them piping hot mulled wine. Emma considered refusing her glass since she couldn't tolerate alcohol well, but today was a special day. Wanting to at least be a part of the lively atmosphere with the rest of her cohort, she accepted the offer.

"Don't drink recklessly now. We certainly wouldn't want a repeat of dinner at Rashida's, hm? So pace yourself."

"Glen."

Before they noticed, Glen and Ian had wandered over to stand in front of the bench Emma and Rashida sat on.

"Oh, that's right! You looked like you were in dire straits that summer night, Emma."

Ian laughed when Rashida agreed.

"Emma's always been weak with alcohol, so she's usually quite reluctant to consume it. Who would have imagined she'd confuse wine sauce with fruit sauce, eh?"

"Pleeease, can we forget about it already? More importantly, Glen, I have to talk to you about something."

"What is it?" Glen raised an eyebrow irritably. He already had a good guess at what Emma wanted to discuss. But she wasn't daunted by his attitude.

"I want to be Lady Brigitte's maid. So please introduce me to her guardian."

Since their first meeting in her second year, Emma and Brigitte had regularly exchanged letters. The whole time, the little girl waited patiently for Emma to become an adult who deemed herself worthy of caring for Brigitte. The only thing left for her to receive was approval of employment from her future

potential employer.

It was a long-awaited wish for Emma. Brigitte had told her she should ask her “big brother” about that. Clearly, she meant Glen. That was why she wanted him to arrange an interview.

“Brigitte’s circumstances are complicated, so my answer is no. Plus, your grades are excellent, Emma. You have your choice of employment, whether you stay in Reauxvil or work abroad.”

“I know, but...”

“Then I suggest you take that route.”

Emma pursed her lips tightly at his overly blunt response. By this point, she was well-versed in controlling her magical energy. Nowadays, it would be impossible for her to make a novice mistake like exploding a teapot. She could even manage any difficult hairstyle with ease.

In truth, she had already received quite a few offers of employment as a lady’s maid from several noble families. Yet she wanted nothing more than to be Brigitte’s maid. *She said she would wait for me, even saying my inexperience wasn’t a bad thing. Lady Brigitte inspired me to work hard this past year. I want to see her grow up, stay by her side.*

For a member of the low-ranked Seagrove family, perhaps she was aiming too high by wanting to work for a duchy in the Olano Kingdom. But she couldn’t deny her strong desire to work as Brigitte’s exclusive maid. She hoped to excel to the point that she would be promoted to head housekeeper and remain with her lady long enough to see her grow up, happily married. What’s more, she would love to follow Brigitte to her new family as well, serving her forever if she could. Emma’s dream had grown dramatically over the past year.

So why won’t he help me...? Dejected, Emma allowed her feelings to overtake her and downed her glass in one long swallow.

“Emma, wait! Gah.”

She heard Glen’s panicked voice.

“Hm...?”

It didn't take long for the starry sky stretching endlessly overhead to start spinning. The twinkling cosmic bodies blurred together with the lantern light floating in the darkness, creating a lovely image. *Mmm. What is this feeling? It's absolutely, positively wonderful.* In the next instant, her blood heated, and she had the most pressing urge to empty her stomach. *Oh, no! I forgot this was mulled wine!* Unfortunately, her epiphany came too late.

"Emma!!!"

Rashida's scream sounded distant. *I need to get up.* As she lurched up from her seat on the bench, strong arms wrapped around her. A comforting scent tickled her nose. *Lovely. Seems I didn't collapse on the lawn...* Once she confirmed she wasn't sprawled disgracefully on the ground, sure enough, Emma lost consciousness.



"NGH...?"

"....."

As Emma surfaced, her mind still hazy, she thought she heard someone say something. After a few seconds, she finally identified Rashida's voice and another person's, this one much lower, deeper. In a dreamy, distant daze, someone placed her gently on something soft and plush. The sensation made her realize it was her bed in her dorm room. *Blast. I must have fainted after recklessly drinking the mulled wine. Ugh, when will I learn?*

"Lord, Emma, you're such a dangerous creature. Can never take my eyes off you, eh?"

Forgive...me. Deep in her mind, she responded to the words he muttered under his breath, but he didn't know that.

"To think, I was almost fooled by the dignified, responsible facade you present... But I learned early on, didn't I? Considering you spoke so unguardedly to me that day when we'd essentially just met."

That...day...? After a while, the other side of her bed dipped under someone's weight.

“Though I’d wager that might have been a sign of how far you’d been driven into a corner... Despite being so close to you now, I still worry about you.”

His voice was strained, as if at his wit’s end. Befuddled as she still was by the effects of the alcohol, even Emma could tell something was making him so tense, distraught. Despite her clouded state of mind, she tried to stretch a hand out toward him in compassion. Except her body felt as heavy as lead. She couldn’t even lift a finger. During the brief minutes she struggled to move, she sensed he stood up because his weight no longer created a depression in her bed.

What does...he mean...by...that day...? She wanted to pursue the truth behind his profound words, but her voice wouldn’t come out. *I’ve had it with spirits! I’ll never drink again!* Emma swore to herself in the depths of her consciousness before falling asleep again.



A few months later. In the intervening period, Emma finished her duties as a time traveler for the Monarchy of Reauxvil. And, in her second life, Marquess Stephenson proposed to the king on her behalf that a dinner party in her honor *not* be held. She had no desire to relive the disaster of her original life, even tangentially. The original celebration had been held at the king’s request because of his desire to reward her service to the nation, so the function had been a foregone conclusion from the start. But this time she was determined to get her way.

Glen still refused to consider her request to be Brigitte’s lady’s maid, which meant she worried incessantly about her employment prospects. Before she knew it, the day of their graduation exam came and went. In a few short days, the graduation party would be held.

Today, she was visiting the Duchy of Bering in the Olano Kingdom, the same house and line Glen used as his alias. As her eyes traveled in awe around the spacious parlor, she posed a question to him, her voice anxious.

“Th-This home... Are your mother and father not in residence?”

The question was a foolish one. She already knew the answer based on what he’d told her in the past. But she didn’t know what to do with this much time

on her hands, so she tried to fill it with such an inane topic.

“Why would they be here when they have their own set of extensive private chambers in the Ulster imperial palace that are heavily guarded for their protection?”

“R-Right... Of course...”

Blast, she thought, hearing Glen’s impish reply.

“Whenever I return to Ulster, I use my given royal name. Otherwise, I use my name and title from Olano.”

Over the years they’d known each other, Emma had deduced Glen wasn’t the son of Duke Bering, but Duke Bering *himself*. Naturally, he needed to keep such information mum.

“So you live here alone?”

“No. There’s one more person here. Wait here, and I’ll introduce you.”

With that, Glen left the parlor. If he didn’t reside here with his parents and siblings, then who in the world could it be? Troubled by the mystery, Emma waited restlessly in the vast drawing room.

She was here at his mansion for one reason—at his behest. He had invited her, saying he wanted to take his time discussing things with her before they graduated. She doubted it would be about her desire to become Brigitte’s maid.

Tempering her expectations, she had received permission from the Magic Academy to leave the campus. She and Glen then proceeded to the heart of the city, where Glen utilized his teleportation magic to convey them there directly. His dwelling and estate were much, much larger than the Eslan residence.

Yet she noticed the house lacked any inhabitants, which she found mysterious. A house on this scale should have had at least a dozen, if not more, servants in its employ. *Perhaps he instructed everyone to leave for the day?* If that was the case, his staff had followed their master’s orders perfectly.

Except that steam rose from the teapot in front of her on the tea table. That meant someone had cast difficult life magic on it to keep it warm. Through the large windows, she looked out into the massive garden outside. The table on

which the tea rested was pure white marble. And the sofa she sat on was of high quality, too. Everything in the refined salon had its place and purpose. Nothing unnecessary here.

Kerchak. When the door opened behind her, she turned around to find a middle-aged man stepping inside. Fitted in a crisp and starched formal shirt and well-tailored jacket. He had an impeccable posture. A single glance told her he was a servant of the finest caliber. *He might be the family butler, then.*

“Lady Emma, I have brought snacks to accompany your tea.”

With a respectful tone, he placed the plate on the table in front of her. Her eyes widened as she stared at it. *These are...* Cookies. Cookies rested on the plate. Not just any cookies. The same ones Glen used to give her during their intense practice sessions to help her control her magic a year ago.

“Are... Are these cookies the usual fare in the Olano Kingdom?”

“No. In fact, I bake them myself.”

The man, probably the butler, responded, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully at Emma’s question.

“Wow! So you can make pastries? How silly of me to assume a pâtissier was in charge.”

“You’re not far from the truth in this case since these cookies are very special.”

“Very...special?” She tilted her head curiously as the man gave her a soft smile.

“Yes, indeed. As you might be aware, my young master was born with extraordinary powers. Since his abilities awakened, his parents assigned tutors to him for various subjects, and he excelled. Yet there were many other things he couldn’t do well, despite his best efforts. In order to aid my hard-working young lord, I concocted these special cookies to make magical control easier.”

Stunned by this revelation, Emma responded with great difficulty. “That’s amazing... You can make something like that?”

“Of course, I didn’t succeed from the get-go. I did a lot of research and tried

my utmost to arrive at an effective recipe. It's easy for someone to say they'll devote themselves to their work, but it's my duty as the young master's chamberlain to give truth to those words by doing everything I can for him. If it's for my lord, I welcome any amount of labor."

Though his tone was slightly mischievous, the man's eyes were gentle. Emma understood that he had watched over Glen since he was a young child. *This... This is how I want to protect and care for a young lady.* If possible, she wanted to be part of a staff led by someone like him. When she thought that, the parlor door opened again.

"Emma!"

"Lady...Brigitte?"

The little girl bounded her way into the room.

"Wait... This is who you meant by the other person who lives with you?"

"Yes, precisely."

While she compared their almost identical features, she recalled what Glen had said about the little girl's "complicated circumstances."

"Is she, perhaps, your illegitimate child...?"

"You must be joking, right?"

At Glen's dumbfounded expression, in her heart, Emma replied, "Of course I am." In the meantime, the butler poured tea for the three. For a while, they enjoyed tea time leisurely, chatting about nothing of import. Then Glen turned toward Brigitte.

"I'm going to talk to Emma about something extremely important now. Do you think you can have fun by yourself in your room?"

"Yup! I'll go back to my room like a good little girl, so make sure you win her over, Brother!"

"Leave it to me."

"Pfft."

It was the first time in her life that Emma had spat out tea so disgracefully.

She was already nervous enough, but she wished they wouldn't say such strange things on top of that. How was she supposed to control her reactions?

As usual, Glen's expression remained calm and confident. Once Brigitte left the parlor, he recrossed his legs and spoke again.

"She's the daughter of one of my paternal uncles, but she doesn't get along with her sisters. I had the same experience as a child... Anyway, I used my graduation from the Magic Academy as an opportunity to ask her if she wanted to live with me for the time being. So that is what I meant by 'complicated circumstances.'"

"Wow, I had no idea... Honestly, though, 'win her over.' I didn't know she was such a jokester..."

"It wasn't a joke. I have every intention of doing exactly that."

Emma was so blindsided that the teacup in her hand crashed with a loud *klink* onto its saucer. Her mind stopped functioning, but once it started working again, she realized the ramifications of Brigitte living here with him.

"We...*are* talking about my becoming Brigitte's maid, yes? Now I understand why you refused to act as an intermediary for the employer. Because *you* are her guardian. But there's no need to win me over for that. You already know it's what I want to do."

"No, that's not what Brigitte and I meant, and I think you know as much. I brought you here to ask you to live your life with *me*."

Emma again froze in shock. Though Glen's *modus operandi* when it came to her largely involved a great deal of teasing and mischief, he was always sincere about his feelings for her. She should have been used to this side of him, but her efforts on that front were meaningless in the face of his ridiculously straightforward declaration.

"I own this estate. You said you wanted to be Brigitte's exclusive maid, but... If you do, you would live here with me. So, I invited you here to make sure you would be comfortable in such a situation."

Glen spoke feverishly as Emma remained motionless, her face flaming. To her, his amethyst eyes took on a deeper hue for some reason. She wanted to look

away but couldn't. Despite her shock, she already knew her answer to his proposal. Had known for years. Happiness steadily rose within her; she could finally voice her feelings after all this time. Except Glen continued speaking at a fast clip, not giving her a chance to respond.

"I... The truth is, Emma, there's something I haven't told you. Only answer after you've reflected deeply on what I'm about to tell you. Please, can you do that for me?" Glen's eyes were uncharacteristically earnest.

"What do you mean...? But strangely enough, you just reminded me of something that's been on my mind for some time... The first time you and I met was the night of that dinner party...wasn't it?"

Glen closed his eyes and folded his arms, leaning back against the opposite sofa he sat on. "...No. We met twice before that night."

What?! She didn't know. Then, instantly, she realized why. *Time travel.*

"I... I'm not sure I remember. But I always thought it strange why you went to such great lengths for me... Will you tell me more?"

"Yes, of course. I invited you here to lay everything bare, after all." Glen straightened, sipped his tea, and resettled comfortably into his seat before he spoke. "The first time we met was in your first life, during our third year at the Academy. As usual, you were cleaning up one of Miss Annette's many messes, and the two of us were sent into town on an errand to correct her blunder."

"I... I remember dreaming about that right before I returned to my life at fifteen. I think we had a lot of bags to carry...and we rode in a carriage?"

"Yes, you basically described what we did at the time. It's one of my most precious memories, you know. So it's possible it slipped into your mind when I transferred my power to you."

He hesitated for a moment, then continued.

"Unfortunately, it was also the day we witnessed something unfortunate—Miss Annette and Bernard's secret liaison. You said you would pretend you never saw it because you wanted to allay your family's worries about you. That was why I reversed time to the day before and made sure you never chanced upon them. That way, I could erase your memory and your resulting sadness."

“Oh...!”

He was confessing to breaking the cardinal law of time travel and rewriting history. For her sake. She couldn't hide her surprise, and Glen's expression didn't change since he had expected this reaction, so he continued calmly.

“Two years later, I met you again... Well, again for me, but as far as you were concerned, it was our first meeting. In a rare move for me, I accepted a request from my father to visit the Monarchy of Reauxvil on official business as a member of Ulster's imperial family.”

In her mind, Emma gasped, and she knew exactly what he was talking about.

“Could it be... Three months after the dinner party?”

“Correct. You guessed right away that I had an affinity with time. Then you told me how, despite losing your own ability, you had finally accepted your destiny as one who only traveled into the future. You accepted your lot in life as a result of your power. But you sounded so unbelievably sad when you talked to me.”

The point three months after the dinner party was the farthest moment in the future Emma knew of. Because traveling there had been her last mission for her country, the morning of the dinner party. As usual, she had been in the palace library doing research with Ian. She vaguely recalled the commotion outside and Ian mentioning to her that it was the result of a prince from Ulster on an official state visit.

“Glen... It was you. You were the prince part of the delegation.”

“I was. And that marked the second time I met you. I also learned then that you had become Prince Victor's fiancée.”



“**MY** name is Emma Grace Seagrove, and I'll be your personal attendant for the duration of your stay here today and tomorrow.”

When he saw her looking so dignified, her spine ramrod straight, Glen lost his grip on the overcoat he had just taken off. It fell to the floor with a soft rustle.

“Excuse me, Your Highness, while I get this.”

Emma bent down and smoothly picked up his coat before hanging it neatly over her arm. He stared at her like he couldn't believe what his eyes were seeing. Aware of his attention, she looked up from the coat, and their eyes locked for a moment. Then Emma smiled at him in recognition.

"Oh! I remember you from our time at the Magic Academy. I was informed of Your Highness's stay in Reauxvil as an exchange student, but we were, in fact, classmates, weren't we? I only just realized since you were using a different name back then."

"Indeed... I'm surprised you even remember me."

"It's only natural! You always stood out wherever you went when we were in school together."

She gave him her finest smile, one reserved for formal occasions.

"You must be weary from all the events and ceremonies today. Shall I bring you a pot of herbal tea while you relax until dinnertime?"

Realizing Emma was about to excuse herself in consideration of him, Glen stopped her with a single request.

"No. No, I'm fine. Would you care to join me for tea instead? I find myself wanting company."

"...It would be an honor."

After her deep azure eyes widened for a moment, she consented with good grace.



"YOU... You're engaged...to Victor?"

Once they finished their introductions, Emma told him more about her situation. Her announcement shocked him to the core.

"Yes. It was a sudden decision made three months ago. I'm currently working as a court lady as part of my training to become his bride."

"Did... Didn't you have another fiancé?"

She briefly cast her eyes down.

“You’re quite informed, hm? But... The truth is, my previous betrothal was part of my reward from the royal family for my service to the nation as a time traveler. Three months ago, at almost the same time I lost my ability, another person with an affinity for time appeared. Due to that, the other party requested the dissolution of our engagement at a royal function attended by the royals and nobility of all places. Which made me damaged goods as far as the marriage mart was concerned.”

Glen made a shocked sound deep in his throat because he couldn’t manage words. He was stunned to hear about Emma’s horrendous treatment. To have someone she’d known since childhood so cruelly break their engagement at an official state dinner, no less. The scandal would forever tarnish the young lady’s reputation, even if she wasn’t at fault. It was, unfortunately, too easy for him to know that, in such cases, the lady in question would find it difficult to secure another good match. *Well... It’s no wonder...she refers to herself as damaged goods.*

“Feeling deeply responsible for the situation, His Majesty not only raised my father’s rank to that of a count but also graciously arranged for my engagement to his son, Prince Victor, who also happens to be a childhood friend.”

“Then... You don’t find this outcome favorable for yourself? All’s well that ends well, I suppose?”

Glen said so because he remembered Bernard’s words when he first turned back time. Yet Emma’s expression clouded even more.

“It is as you say. But... I lost my closest friends and my protector, whom I considered a friend too... In the blink of an eye, I lost everyone who supported me, so I’m terribly afraid. Of course, Prince Victor is a kind, sincere individual. I have no complaints about him as a person or friend. But when I think about how much of my life still remains and whether or not I can ever trust another person from the bottom of my heart again, unconditionally... I know my worries are impious, especially in light of how the royal family has welcomed me with open arms. They’ve done more for me than I deserve. And yet...”

Emma continued hesitantly.

“A short while ago, the me from three months ago briefly inhabited my body

for a mission. When I opened my eyes and woke up, I found my happiness from that period lingering...and it made me a bit sad. I normally wouldn't discuss anything like this with anyone, except...for some reason, I feel quite strange today."

Glen didn't see a trace of the dignified, awe-inspiring figure who had powerfully drawn him in with her myriad, ever-changing expressions two years ago. All he could see now were empty eyes devoid of hope like she had given up on life. But until she opened up just now, she had skillfully concealed her devastation. The fact that she poured her heart out to him, and him alone, fiercely roused his instinct to protect her.

"Then, if you could do it all over again, when would you want to return?"

Someone normal would have taken his question as a joke or an interesting hypothetical to liven up a conversation. But Emma, who had an affinity for time, answered seriously and plainly.

"There's no point even thinking about it because it's impossible to remake one's life. I've already lost my power, and even if I hadn't, it's commonly accepted that the past can't be changed regardless."

"I was merely joking, though it was in poor taste. Please don't take it so seriously."

Glen's tone and manner of speaking abruptly became more informal and friendly. She stared at him, confused for a beat before a smile tilted her lips up. She remembered again that they were the same age, not to mention cohorts in the same graduating class.

"Um... You're right; forgive me. Then, in that case, I would return to the day the dinner party took place. So I could have the pleasure of venting my spleen on the traitorous lout who not only chose such a detestable light pink dress but also had the absolute gall to disrespect His Majesty."

"Oh ho, a fine plan indeed. I'm already quaking in my boots, and I'm not even the one who'd be on the receiving end of your wrath."

Emma's smile brightened at his teasing rejoinder, and she continued. "Hm... Though I wouldn't mind returning to the time I started at the Academy.

Truthfully, I gave up on my childhood dream, but lately, I find myself thinking of it more and more. I would be more than happy to marry His Highness Victor, but if I ever had the chance, I think I'd enjoy going down the path of my childhood dream instead."

"...You don't say."

In their third year at the Magic Academy, on the day Glen deliberately erased, Emma had told him about her dream, so he was well aware.

"I... I'm so sorry. I went too far just now. Would you kindly forget I said anything?"

Emma came to her senses when she realized Glen was seriously pondering her words.

"...As you wish."

"Heh. I've never talked to someone like this before. I feel better now, like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. Thank you very much, Your Highness."

The smile she showed him was a clear sign that the many layers of armor wrapped around her initially had completely vanished. *Don't you have any idea how defenseless you are? I'd wager the only reason you even talked to me so freely and vulnerably is because you think I have nothing to do with your series of misfortunes. Because I'm a stranger, I can view your story objectively instead of being carried away by emotion. You would be wrong, though, dear Emma.*

Her unconditional faith in him made him incredibly happy. But it also stirred a jealous need to make certain no one else ever saw her like this.



"AFTER that, I turned back time three months to the night of the dinner party, which I attended to cast my magic on you. The spell where I conferred my affinity with time as well as the time-delay activation. Except I made sure to respect your wishes, Emma. I set it so that it would only activate if you truly, *truly*, from the bottom of your heart, wanted to travel back in time to remake your life. Oh, and by the way, I had a good reason for referring to myself as Lester. It was one of the conditions to activate the spell."

As Glen told her everything, Emma covered her face with both hands.

“Years ago, when you told me you had reversed time... Each time you did, it was for my sake...”

Oh my goodness. She found it unbelievable. She couldn’t even look directly at Glen. Because aside from her family, she had never received such single-minded affection from another.

“I’ll have you know I didn’t expect any of this, either. The truth is, I never wanted you to find out, Emma. All I hoped was for you to have as few sad memories as possible so that you could make your dream come true. I fully intended to remain just a classmate, help you whenever you needed, but keep my distance.”

Though he clearly tried to keep his emotions in check, Glen tapped one foot on the floor restlessly.

“Except...being by your side made me so incredibly happy I couldn’t stay away. Honestly...anytime it comes to you, I struggle to explain anything. The words just fly from my mind.”

His voice, gruff with embarrassment, was so unlike him that Emma forced herself to stop hiding behind her hands. When she did, he was sitting, legs still crossed, with an elbow braced on the armrest, resting his chin on his hand while he stared out the window self-consciously. She suspected his face looked like this the one time they were in the carriage together. *I’ve always wanted to see this expression.*

“I forgot to ask you, Glen, but you don’t have a claim to the Ulster throne, do you?”

“Technically, yes. I’m fifth in line.”

“Oh, thank goodness. It relieves me to know there won’t be a king who would use his power to change history for little ol’ me... You really are too much, you know.”

“I...can’t disagree.”

The only reason they could even have this repartee was that they both knew

what it meant to possess an affinity for the element of time. It was her way of implicitly telling him she understood and accepted both the uneasiness and guilt he had held on to for so long over his actions.

They exchanged meaningful glances before they burst out laughing. Once their merriment subsided, they gazed at each other again.

“Well then... Have I succeeded in winning you over?”

She had fooled herself into thinking he only had sweet words left for her, so to hear him sound suddenly businesslike had her chuckling again.

“You scoundrel! Pfft...”

“In any case, I’d wager you need some time to think about this, especially since you had no warning. I don’t mind waiting. You can tell me your answer after the graduation party—”

Having regained his usual confidence, Glen spoke unhurriedly, but Emma interjected before he could finish.

“No, I don’t need any more time. I can say you have indeed won me over. In fact, if I’m being honest, you won me over a long time ago.

“Right, right, it’s only natural you would feel a bit uneasy. So after the graduation party...” Glen stopped himself. Anticipating a different answer, he responded calmly to allay her worries. But now he paused and allowed Emma’s answer to sink in. “Wait... Just wait. You heard everything I said, yes?”

“Of course.”

Creak. The sofa squeaked as Glen jerked forward. The amethyst eyes he snared her with held joy, surprise, and something else. Until now, despite the heaviness of their discussion, he had remained composed, in control. But today, for the first time, he revealed the inner turmoil he’d suppressed. Clearly, he hadn’t expected his feelings to be returned, despite everything he’d done. Or maybe he thought they wouldn’t be because of what he considered his highhandedness instead of a generosity of spirit. Emma found his reaction charming and so very dear.

“Glen... I think it’s fine for you to have hope about my feelings for you. You’re

not the only one who wants to do everything they can for the person most important to them. You're not the only one who wants to see them happy."

In a flash, he stood up and moved in front of her, holding out a hand. She placed her right hand on top of his palm. The night of the dinner party, he had taken it without her consent, but now she gave it of her own volition. And the second her fingers slipped into his, he tugged her into his arms.

"Does this mean you accept my proposal to be with me?"

Her heart beat so loudly that it aggravated her. But now she realized it overlapped with his racing heart as she felt it drum against her chest. Emma nodded slowly. When she did, his arms tightened around her.

Finding it difficult to breathe, she raised her head to speak. His beautiful face was a hair's breadth away from hers. Glen gently stroked his fingers through her hair. Tension pulled her nerves tight, and she closed her eyes, savoring the caress and the moment.

They remained locked in their embrace for some time before they realized her curfew would be soon. Using teleportation magic, he escorted her back to dormitory eight and then returned to his dorm room. Upon his return, he found his friend and attendant, Hans, waiting for him.

"Glen, regardless of how much you insist lineage doesn't matter, don't you think *your* family will have questions? For now, you plan on hiring her as a lady's maid, but someday, you'll take her as your wife, won't you? That said... I have a feeling Ulster will find a way to interfere to your detriment, so much so that you risk losing Lady Emma. I can well imagine her giving up her right to be by your side to protect you. She would just say something like, 'I'm simply Lady Brigitte's maid. Nothing more.'"

"I admit you have a point."

Glen rubbed his temples, deep in thought. Should the need ever arise, he had prepared himself long ago to renounce his right to the throne. So he couldn't care less about Emma's bloodline.

He only lived in Olano out of deference to his eldest brother, the crown prince. But it wasn't like he'd cut off relations with his parents, the emperor and

empress. His parents still cared for their fifth son. That meant they would find his choice of spouse, a foreigner from a low-ranked house, displeasing because of how highly they prized pedigree.

It went without saying that Glen was far enough removed from the line of succession that he could push his way through their objections. There was even precedent in the past of royals who had overcome the difference in stations to marry whomever they loved. But there was a chance Emma would nevertheless feel inferior.

“Before...when we first learned that Emma wound up with an omni-affinity. You investigated her family history, right? Are you certain there was no blood relative from the Ulster royal family in her bloodline?” Glen asked.

“I went back to the farthest records I could find because you were so sure of the probability...but I found nothing to indicate a connection. Although... It wouldn’t hurt to check again, just in case.”

“Please. Thank you.”

“Also.” Accepting his lord’s assignment, Hans changed his tone to a bantering one. “Let it be known far and wide that I’ve never seen you looking so happy before.”

“Stuff it.”

Glen scowled at Hans, trying to hide his embarrassment, while his friend grinned shamelessly at his expense.



A few days later, the graduation party took place at the Magic Academy. It was called a party, but it was really more of an informal, relaxed gathering for nobles and common folk. In the gigantic hall, a long buffet table lined one wall, and everyone stood around chatting and eating. The party presented an opportunity for students to mingle with the teachers who’d looked after them for three years and socialize with their friends. And a chance to say their final farewells.

“Well, this is our second time attending a dinner party together, hm?”

“Indeed it is. I much prefer this, since the last time I was yelled at after we had such a pleasant conversation about food.”

Emma and Glen watched the lively proceedings from a spot by one of the walls.

“And, between those two events, you lost your valuable power, didn’t you?”

“Oh, might you be referring to my kiss on your hand?”

When Glen said that so casually, Emma’s cheeks warmed with color. In fact, she wasn’t thinking about his kiss disguised as a spell. No, she reminisced about what happened between them after they professed their feelings for each other at the Bering residence in Olano. She had received an impetuous kiss from him. He hadn’t been calm when he’d pressed his lips to hers, so Emma had taken a startled step back, crashing into a chair.

The loud sound of impact had brought the butler rushing in, worried. Unfortunately for all of them, he caught them in the act. Which she thought was a disaster since she would be working at *Duke* Bering’s house soon enough. Just remembering it made her flush an even deeper scarlet.

“Hm. If not the kiss that night, might you enlighten me on where your mind is focused?”

“None...of your business, good sir!”

She knew Glen was doing this on purpose, so Emma glared frostily at him, her cheeks still stained red. Though they had finally confirmed their love for each other, their relationship remained fundamentally the same. He would set the bait, and she would inevitably rise to take it.

“The barrette is lovely on you.”

“O-Oh! Th-Thank you.”

“I’m glad I gifted it to you.”

His expression was so soft, she could almost be tricked into thinking she’d imagined his teasing seconds ago. Today, Emma wore the pearl barrette Glen gave her for her twenty-first birthday. Truthfully, she’d been dying for him to see her wearing it, but she hadn’t mustered the courage to slip it into her hair

until tonight. Looking at his pleased face now, though, she wished she had worn it much sooner.

“Emma! So this is where you were hiding!”

“Rashida!”

After graduation, Rashida would attend the special vocational school for servants in the Empire of Ulster. Because of her packed schedule, before she departed as an exchange student, today marked the last day she’d be able to see Emma for some time.

“Rashida, I’m so, so glad I got to meet you. Thanks to you, I had so much fun at school.” Emma hugged her friend tightly.

“I feel the same, Emma. Once we’re both settled into our new lives, promise me you’ll come to visit, hm?” Rashida accompanied her request with a giggle.

“If you run into any trouble, feel free to come to me. I’ll help you,” Glen said.

“Thank you very much, Lord Glen. And please... Look after Emma for me.”

“Of course. I’ve been saddled with an outrageous hoyden, but you can rest assured I’ll do my best to keep up with her.”

While the two talked like sentimental guardians of an errant child, Emma and Ian had their own conversation nearby. His role as her attendant and protector was finally at an end.

“Ian, the truth is, I don’t want to leave you. I already feel lonely without you. So, from the bottom of my heart, thank you for everything.”

“Mind your words, Emma, or Glen will box my ears out of jealousy, eh? And you have nothing to thank me for. I only did my job.”

“As you wish. Hm... Your next charge will most definitely be Annette, hm? Good luck, my dear friend!” She chuckled at the thought.

“Lady Annette, huh...? I must admit, I feel a bit, no, actually a great deal uneasy...”

The night drew on, full of everyone’s thoughts and emotions. This time, for certain, Emma’s three years at the Magic Academy came to an end.



ONCE Emma completed the paperwork and process for moving out of the dormitory, she boarded her family's carriage for the journey back to Seagrove Manor. There, she saw someone who made her eyes widen in surprise.

"Grandmother, what...?"

Her grandmother should have been in her home far away. Yet here she was, right before Emma's eyes. Having waited patiently for her granddaughter, she beamed at her. Hints of the coquette from her younger days slipped through her smile.

"Welcome home, Emma. Many congratulations on your graduation."

"Thank you very much, Grandmother!"

Oh, I remember now... Grandmother came all the way here to the royal capital the first time I graduated, too. Despite Emma reconstructing her life from her fifteenth year, there hadn't been many changes to events or people she didn't directly affect. The fact that her grandmother's visit remained unchanged had her secretly sighing in relief.

When Emma was young, her grandmother lived with them in the capital at Seagrove Manor. She had rich caramel-brown hair and deep azure eyes, just like her. Their uncanny resemblance led to her grandmother spoiling her rotten for as far back as she could remember. She was also the same woman who had instructed Emma so strictly in social manners and demeanor.

They headed inside, chatting until the dinner hour arrived. Naturally, the topic of conversation revolved around Emma's upcoming place of employment.

"Emma, dear, your parents told me you'd be working as a lady's maid for a duke in the neighboring country? How wonderful!"

Her granddaughter chuckled with pleasure.

"Yes, you heard right. I'll be working for one of my classmates' families, specifically taking care of a seven-year-old girl. Luckily for me, I'll be her exclusive maid, too!"

Emma was elated by her grandmother's praise.

“Truth be told, your old man worried a great deal about you after your engagement to Viscount Sagden’s son was dissolved. Our social networks overlap with his; I would have only been able to find you work with a family connected to both of ours. Glad to hear I don’t have to concern myself on that front any longer.”

“Oh, Father, I wish you had just told me! Have you forgotten I was an excellent student at the Academy? I received quite a few offers of employment as a lady’s maid from many aristocratic households!” She pouted at her father’s well-meaning but insensitive words, while her grandmother smiled gently at them.

“Which reminds me, dear. What’s the name of the family you’ll be working for?” her grandmother asked.

“The Duchy of Bering.”

“Never say so!”

Klink. Her grandmother’s shocked response was accompanied by the loud clatter of cutlery banging on the table, a faux pas the older woman would never make.

“Grandmother, whatever is the matter?”

“No. No, it’s nothing. The Duchy of Bering is in the Olano Kingdom, yes?”

“That’s right. You know so much about everything, Grandmother.”

“Perhaps too much... In any case, congratulations are in order once more, Emma.”

Hm? The usual gentle, elegant smile stretched across her grandmother’s lips. Yet her expression, one Emma couldn’t decipher but knew held significance, remained stuck in her mind.



SEVERAL days later, a carriage from the Duchy of Bering arrived at Seagrove Manor. Emma and her family spent time saying goodbye to each other before she started dragging her luggage out. When she stepped through the front door, as usual, she found herself dazzled by the scenery outside. But something

was different this time.

The trees in this area bloomed with white flowers. Only during this season did their sweet, nostalgic scent permeate the air. And he stood under one such tree, his gaze focused beyond the fence. Emma narrowed her eyes against the bright sunlight streaming through the tree branches and flowers.

“Glen! I didn’t expect you to come yourself.”

“Should I not have bothered?”

“Oh, you know, I’m incredibly happy to see you here.”

Smiling at him, just as she reached for his hand, the door behind Emma opened again.

“Hello, Duke Bering.”

Her grandmother stepped out of the foyer and into the garden. Acknowledging her greeting, Glen responded with a courteous one of his own.

“A pleasure to meet you. My name is Glen Ray Bering.”

“So *that* is the name you’re living under, hm?”

Her grandmother tittered. Emma stared curiously at her meaningful smile. *What does she mean...? I haven’t told her anything about Glen whatsoever.*

His expression changed.

“I take it... You’re aware of who I am?”

“Indeed, I’ve heard many rumors about you, young man. The prince of my homeland, one of great promise to boot. Your grandfather and I were great friends in our youth, you know. I feel quite nostalgic seeing you now.”

His grandfather. Which would mean Ulster’s previous emperor? This was the first Emma heard of her grandmother having such connections. Did she just hear the older woman refer to the Empire of Ulster as her homeland? Hearing one new piece of information after another stunned her speechless. Next to her, Glen reintroduced himself.

“My name in the Empire of Ulster is Lester Ray Quinziato. I apologize for my earlier oversight.”

He hardly ever used his original full name, which made this situation all the more baffling to Emma. Her grandmother nodded in acknowledgment, then took her time looking at them in turn, her eyes deeply amused. She giggled again before speaking.

“I see, I see... I do believe I have the gist of things now. Then you must be familiar with the unwritten rule, yes?”

Unwritten...rule? Her confusion deepened, but Glen understood what her grandmother meant right away.

“Of course I am. Ahem... On my life, I make this vow.”

Hand pressed to his chest, he bowed respectfully to her grandmother, who smiled in delight.



ONCE they settled into the carriage and departed, Emma questioned Glen.

“Glen. What was that...?”

“Frankly, I was surprised too. I do believe your grandmother is related to Ulster’s royal family.”

“She’s what...?! Impossible! I’ve never heard anything of the sort in my whole life.”

“I’m guessing she hid her connection due to complicated circumstances. Which would explain why you ended up with an affinity for all the elements. I suspect that when I gave you my version of time, your blood reacted powerfully to the new addition, recognizing its link to Ulster’s imperial bloodline. Mind you, this is all conjecture on my part, but I believe we’ll discover the truth once we properly and thoroughly investigate your grandmother’s true origins.”

Glen’s words made hope bloom within Emma’s chest. *He mentioned how the pool of marriage partners for the Ulster royal family was limited in order to retain their standing as heads of the suzerain state. This whole time, I thought I had no connection, but perhaps...* When her hope threatened to expand beyond her control, she silently admonished herself and changed the topic.

“Oh, what did she mean by ‘unwritten rule’?”

“Right, that. Hm... Right, okay. Emma, do you know the biggest difference between the Monarchy of Reauxvil and the Empire of Ulster?”

“Ummm. National power?”

Glen snorted with laughter at her inelegant, unsophisticated reply. When he subsided into quiet chuckles, he spoke again. “Not quite. The Empire of Ulster has a very, very old unwritten rule for its people—to love one person, and only one, their entire life.”

“Oh... How lovely.”

If only Emma had stopped herself at that point. But her mind turned back to the scene in the garden, where Glen had bowed to her grandmother after she mentioned the unwritten rule. The words he said rang in her ears. Her face went up in flames. *Then... He... Earlier...*

“Emma.”

“...Yes, my lord.”

She hadn’t even noticed him take her hand, which he gripped tightly in his. Then he made his declaration.

“Emma, on my life, I vow to love and protect you until the end of my days. You are the only one for me.”



She knew better than anyone that he wasn't just paying her lip service. Everything he had done for her until now flashed through her mind. At this point, words felt like an extravagance she didn't need. Yet he gave them to her anyway. Her heart bursting with love, Emma murmured quietly.

"You know... For some reason, that sounds like you're promising your future to me."

"Of course I am. What other meaning is there?"

The devilish glint returned to his eyes, and, though she blushed, she couldn't help thinking, *Yes, I do love him*. Then Glen lowered his face to hers, and their lips pressed together.

This kiss was different from the last one. Warm, gentle. The carriage trod its way smoothly even now, without a single errant sway. Cocooned by the many ways he expressed his gentleness, gratified by it, Emma knew she would be happy for the rest of her life. She was glad she hadn't resigned herself to her fate the first time around, because she couldn't imagine not knowing this truth.

The childhood dream she hadn't been able to give up was now coming to fruition. Meeting her special, once-in-a-lifetime friend. A carriage that didn't rock. This sense of security allowed her to accept anything, no matter what happened. All of it and more Glen had given her without saying a word. Though she was beyond grateful to him, at the same time, her own cowardice vexed her.

Once they arrived at the Bering residence, she realized there was no need for such a negative sentiment. At long last, she had become the lady's maid she aspired to be. Though plenty of room remained for improvement in her magic, she possessed the confidence to protect Brigitte. She could pour a delicious cup of tea and draw all sorts of special baths. Not to mention her mastery of even the most difficult hairstyles. Her knowledge base had an additional three years' worth of information. If anything, she planned on reading many more books so she could study even more difficult magic and how to use it.

Emma doubted she would peek into the future again. She might end up overly relying on Glen occasionally, but as long as she took care not to imbibe spirits or let the impulsive side of her take control, things would work out. One way or

another. She was sure of it. Using all the weapons and tools he'd so generously given her over the years, she would do everything in her power to protect her very own charge.

Epilogue

“HELLO! It’s a pleasure to meet you all. My name is Emma Grace Seagrove, and I’ll be working here starting today!”

After their arrival at the Bering residence, they entered the mansion, where Emma was met with the inquisitive, seemingly infinite stares of the entire staff gathered in the foyer. She bowed her head and introduced herself cheerfully. They all smiled kindly at her in welcome, so she felt both elated and nervous. A strangely ticklish feeling, different yet reminiscent of the flutters Glen evoked in her. Incidentally, he stood behind her.

“I’m Robert. Lady Emma, we are so honored to have you with us.”

A strikingly dignified middle-aged man stepped forth from within the center of the line of staff. The gentle-mannered butler beamed as he introduced himself. He wore a brilliantly white, starched shirt, and his posture was straight as an arrow.

He’s... The same servant who had served her cookies not so long ago. So she had been right about his position as head of household staff.

“Likewise! Since I’m on the lowest rung of the hierarchy, please call me Emma.”

“Oh, I’m not sure...” Robert looked troubled as he gazed inquiringly behind Emma.

“It’s fine. Address her however she wishes.”

“Understood, my lord.” He nodded elegantly in acknowledgment when he received permission from his ruefully smiling master.

“Emma!” Her name echoed exuberantly throughout the hall. From the top of the spiral staircase came her mistress’s excited voice.

“Lady Brigitte.”

“You’re finally here. I’ve been waiting for ages and ages for you!”

The little girl raced down the stairs. Emma smiled and caught her in her arms a few seconds later as her charge hurled herself delightedly at her.

“Right then, my lady. What shall we do today?”

Afterword

NICE to meet you. My name is Saki Ichibu. Thank you so much for reading this work.

This story received a special award during the *2020 Mahō no i-Land* book contest. I was obsessed with everything *Mahō no i-Land* put out when I was a teenager! I never imagined the day would come when I would receive an award in their contest. One never knows what will happen in life, do they...? In any case, I was extremely happy and honored!

“I want to write a love story where it’s obvious the leads adore each other without the need for words!” And that’s how this story was born. I like heroes who express their love verbally, but...I really wanted to write about a different kind of male lead. One who was quite taciturn and aloof... Except his actions clearly convey his overflowing affection for the heroine. One who goes so above and beyond he makes any reader swoon.

Hard-working Emma and Glen, supporting her in secret. I admit that the pace at which their story develops can be a bit frustrating, even though I was the one who wrote it. “Glen, you really love Emma, don’t you...? Then why won’t you just tell her, you idiot! Just tell her already! If you don’t, she’ll never know, and your love will never be reciprocated!” I had those thoughts, too. So you can imagine the sigh of relief I breathed when we finally arrived at their happy ending.

On that note, don’t you think Cocosuke-sensei did an incredible job of illustrating Glen as such a super stud?! This story wouldn’t have been complete without our handsome Glen! I want all the readers to enjoy Sensei’s beautiful illustrations while they join Emma on her heart-pounding adventure.

By the way, quite a few of the story elements are incorporated into the cover art. I recommend you look at it again after you finish reading. I have a feeling you’ll spot the little details and enjoy their world all over again.

I think it’s about time for me to wrap this up, so let me end with acknowledgments. I’m so grateful to everyone who was involved in the

publication of this book. To all the readers who read the story while it was being serialized online; to my editors who helped me completely overhaul the plot; to Cocosuke-sensei for the incredible illustrations; and to everyone else who supported me—thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I always dreamed of being published by Kadokawa Beans Bunko. Every day has been filled with so much fun and joy in the few months since I won the award. So this story has become truly special to me.

I'd be delighted if we met again someday.

July 2021



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